

# Saint Ann's

By W. E. Norris



London: Chatto & Windus

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SAINT ANN'S





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# SAINT ANN'S

A NOVEL

BY  
W. E. NORRIS

[AUTHOR OF

'A BACHELOR'S BLUNDER,' 'MY FRIEND JIM,' 'THIRLEY HALL,'  
'BILLY BELLEW,' ETC.



A NEW EDITION

LONDON  
CHATTO & WINDUS

1897





823  
N475  
1897

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# SAINT ANN'S

## CHAPTER I.

### THE WANDERER'S RETURN.

THE good folks of Bridstow had been roused to a sensation of languid curiosity on that fine May evening which, as they had been given to understand, was to witness the arrival of Mr. Foley and his son at St. Ann's. One advantage of living in the south-west corner of Great Britain is that the emotions and sensations of all who reside there become of necessity more or less languid, the soft climate of that favoured region forbidding men and women to worry themselves overmuch about anything, and promoting a philosophic spirit which is, happily, quite independent of any tedious system of philosophy. Yet language, to have any meaning at all, can only be employed in a relative sense, and it was, so to speak, exciting to hear that Mr. Foley was coming home at last.

The event was one of no slight importance to the



parish, as Mrs. Latimer, the Vicar's wife, very justly remarked. True, Mr. Foley was not in himself so influential a personage as Lord Braunton, who owned nearly the whole country-side, nor would anybody have thought of comparing the modest property attached to St. Ann's with the wide acres that surrounded Braunton Towers; still, St. Ann's might be said to dominate Bridstow, and the dwellers at St. Ann's were likely to be brought into far closer and more frequent intercourse with the villagers and the few families of neighbouring gentry than was Lord Braunton, whose duties or tastes involved prolonged periods of absence.

So that one could not help wondering what sort of a man Mr. Foley was, and whether he and his son would be any improvement upon poor old Miss Lee, who had rented the house for upwards of a quarter of a century, and who now lay at rest in the parish churchyard, to the temporary—it was to be hoped only temporary—detriment of local charities. That Mr. Foley should, by choice, have fixed his abode upon the Continent of Europe during all that long time was scarcely reassuring; there must be something wrong, or, at all events, very odd, about an English gentleman who prefers other countries to his own.

‘At the same time,’ said worthy Mrs. Latimer, ‘it is never too late to mend, and I suppose he means to stay at home now. Besides, he is said to be a very clever amateur artist—which may be some excuse.

Though, for my own part, I doubt whether Italy or Switzerland, or any other foreign land, could beat the scenery of South Devon in fine weather. He ought to be well off, too ; for I have always heard that his uncle, old Mr. Sam Foley, whom he succeeded, was a rich man. I don't think I will mention the exact amount of poor dear Miss Lee's subscriptions to him, unless, of course, he should suggest giving a smaller sum.'

A hasty, though eager, survey of him did not, it had to be confessed, convey the idea of open-handed benevolence. A tall, spare, gray-bearded man, who walked with his head slightly bent, whose cheeks were deeply furrowed, and who looked decidedly cross—such was the report which scrupulous veracity compelled Mrs. Latimer to make to the Vicar of the parish. Having had occasion to purchase a sixpenny magazine at the railway bookstall, she had chanced to be upon the platform when the London express came in, and had thus obtained the earliest possible opportunity of scrutinizing her husband's new parishioner.

'The son,' she continued, 'seemed to be really nice. Quite young ; tall and broad-shouldered, and, I should say, handsome ; but I got no more than a glimpse of his face, because they hurried away at once, leaving the servants to collect their luggage, and naturally I was more interested in his father than in him. There were two servants, a valet and a footman in livery, which looks as if they were well-to-do. Only I am afraid, from his face, that old Mr. Foley isn't quite so sociably inclined as young Mr. Foley.'

The two gentlemen whose respective characteristics were thus succinctly divined and defined did not notice the stout little lady on the platform. They had not supposed that their advent would be an affair of much consequence to the Vicar or to the Vicar's wife, or to anybody else in Bridstow. They had had a long journey; they were tired and dusty and anxious to reach their destination, which one of them had never beheld before, while the other, who had seen it often enough in years gone by, was hoping, not without misgivings, that St. Ann's might not prove utterly uninhabitable.

'I didn't see my way to letting the house stand empty,' the latter remarked deprecatingly, as he and his son drove away in the open carriage which had been sent to meet them, 'and there seemed to be no chance of securing another tenant. But how in the world you will manage to amuse yourself here, Arthur, I can't think.'

Mrs. Latimer was mistaken in setting him down as cross; he was not that; only he was nervous and worried, as it was his nature to be. The younger man opened his lips to reply; but apparently thought better of it, and waited a moment before he observed cheerfully, 'Well, it's an awfully pretty place, anyhow.'

'Yes, it's pretty. Unfortunately, you are no great lover of prettiness—in the form of landscape. A pretty landscape would scarcely suffice to make you enjoy existence, I mean.'

The young man who had been addressed as Arthur



laughed. 'Well, no,' he confessed; 'I don't suppose it would. As far as that goes, it wouldn't suffice for you either, would it?'

'Oh, I'm an old man,' Mr. Foley returned, with a shrug of his shoulders. 'What does it signify whether I enjoy existence or not? St. Ann's is as good a place to die in as another. Better than another, indeed, seeing that it is nice and handy to the family vault.'

He presented no appearance of being an immediate candidate for funeral obsequies, nor was he what, in these days of longevity, is accounted an old man; although he might very well have passed for being nearer seventy than sixty. As a fact, he was but fifty-eight, and had always had fairly good health. For various reasons, good spirits had long ago ceased to be numbered amongst his privileges.

The drive from the railway station, through the narrow streets of the little fishing-village, and up the steep hill near to the summit of which the old red house of St. Ann's is situated, did not occupy more than twenty minutes. A straight avenue, on either side of which well-grown ilexes and conifers raised their dark foliage against a pale blue sky, led by a gentle ascent from the lodge to a spacious flower-garden, and so to the front-door. Everything was neat, trim, and in perfect order; for Miss Lee had been an excellent tenant, and Mr. Foley had thought that he could not do better than retain the services of her faithful domestics, adding to their number a

couple of his own. Only, when you hate a place, you are not made to like it any the more by finding that there is no excuse for reasonable complaint in its outward aspect. Such, at least, was the vexed inward reflection of the owner, as he stepped out of his carriage and acknowledged the respectful greetings of the servants, who had deemed it their duty to assemble in the hall. He had not told his son that he hated St. Ann's; he had expressed his intention of residing there for the remainder of his days; so that it would have been ridiculous and injudicious to begin by mentioning that he had a prejudice against his home. Perhaps he entertained a secret hope that Arthur would hate the place too—in which event it might become incumbent upon him to quit it and seek once more the sunny Southern lands which he loved.

But Arthur, who parted from him immediately after their entrance, and who presently set forth on a tour of inspection, did not think that he should hate the place at all. To be sure, this strongly-built, fresh-coloured young man, whose blue eyes looked out cheerfully upon a world with the sorrows and disappointments of which he had as yet but a slight acquaintance, had not the remotest intention of spending the remainder of his days at St. Ann's; and that made a difference. At the age of four-and-twenty one likes very well to have a beautiful, peaceful, and commodious home, especially if there be partridge and pheasant shooting attached to it; but neither for the sake of beauty, nor peace, nor shooting

is one content to stay at home always. Nor, of course, ought one to be so. At the age of fifty-eight, on the other hand, it may naturally be assumed that the advantages above enumerated possess a higher value; and Arthur, as he stood, with his hands in his pockets, looking out across the sea, said to himself:

‘I don’t see why this shouldn’t suit the governer. He has a taste for gardening, and he’ll be able to potter about and sketch, and I dare say he’ll get some of his friends down to stay with him. Oh, I should think it ought to do.’

It would have done very well, no doubt, if it had not happened to be associated in Mr. Foley’s mind with disagreeable memories; for the house was a charming, old-fashioned, irregular building, overgrown with creepers and climbing roses, and the prospect from the terrace was of a nature to please the artistic eye. Three or four hundred feet beneath lay Bridstow, a picturesque jumble of whitewashed cottages, congregated round the tiny harbour, and straggling for a short distance up the hillside towards the gray church-tower; to the eastward of the village, and following the curve of the bay, a row of more modern and more pretentious edifices, fronted by a dozen bathing-machines, gave evidence that even to this remote spot the inevitable seaside visitor of summer had begun to penetrate; but beyond these, the far-stretching coast-line, with its red cliffs, its frequent indentations, and its occasional patches of white sand, showed scarcely a sign of human habita-

tion, nor would anyone, surveying the hazy, blue distance, have guessed that he was gazing at the rim of an over-populated island.

Inland was a wide expanse of moor, which was flecked with gold here and there by patches of the ever-blooming gorse, and which would be purple with heather by-and-by; but the combes which sloped down from it towards the sea were thickly wooded. One could guess that there were streams at the bottom of these deep clefts, and one might hope that there were trout in the streams. Arthur Foley made a mental note of them, and resolved to explore them. Meanwhile, the exploration of the garden, the shrubberies, and the stables gave him enough to do until it was time to go in and dress for dinner.

That repast was served in a spacious dining-room, the furniture of which was solid and handsome, if not quite in accordance with modern ideas of beauty, and when dessert and privacy had been arrived at, Mr. Foley felt justified in pronouncing a moderate encomium upon the cook.

‘That old Miss Lee,’ he observed, ‘evidently knew how to make herself comfortable. Of course, nobody in this country can really afford to keep a cook unless he has about £20,000 a year; but one must be thankful for small mercies, and it is something to be able to count upon food which is not positively revolting. I remember,’ he added, after a pause and a long sigh, ‘that my uncle used to have a cook whom I thought excellent at the time. But that was ages

ago ; one had no palate in those days ! I don't think I have ever spoken much to you about my old uncle, or about how he came to make me his heir, have I ?'

He had never spoken much to his son about anything connected with their family affairs ; for he was a very reticent man, and, although he might have been called, and indeed was, even-tempered, he was neither sympathetic nor approachable. But Arthur had heard from other sources how old Sam Foley had had two nephews, and how, having quarrelled with the one whom he had been supposed to favour, he had bequeathed the whole of his fortune to the other. The young man therefore replied :

'No ; all I know about him is that he had an uncommonly pretty place, and that he had the good taste to leave it to you. I suppose he was rather a queer old customer, wasn't he ?'

'Because he left me St. Ann's and the life-rent of a tolerably good fortune ? Well, I dare say many people thought so at the time ; I dare say my cousin, Robert Hamersley, thought so.. In fact, if my memory does not deceive me, Robert Hamersley described him in even less complimentary terms than those which you have used ; although, after all, I was his brother's son, and it is more usual for property to follow the male than the female line. Setting every other consideration aside, it seems to me that that should have had some weight with him.'

'Tell me about Robert Hamersley,' said Arthur, with increased interest and animation ; for his



curiosity had often been excited upon the subject of a relative whom he had never seen, but whose name was familiar to him and to the rest of the British public as that of one of the most intrepid and adventurous travellers of the age. 'What did he do? Why was he cut off with a shilling?'

Mr. Foley frowned slightly and looked down at the table, drumming upon it with his long white fingers. 'I don't think,' he replied, 'that there is any need for us to go into that old story for the present. There was a scandal, and your great-uncle was displeased. I think he was right to be displeased, and I think he was right to disinherit Robert; but you can easily understand that the fact of my having supplanted the man whom he had intended to make his heir has caused me occasional qualms of conscience, and—well, I suppose I may say that it has made me a little disinclined to revisit this place. An absurd feeling, no doubt; still, not altogether an unnatural one.'

There was a short interval of silence before Arthur remarked:

'He must be a plucky fellow. That book of his about South America beats any sensational novel I ever read, and he did some wonderful things in Central Africa too. He must be more or less under a cloud, though, because no Government has ever done anything for him. I wonder why his services have never been recognised!'

'Whose—Robert's?' asked Mr. Foley, rousing himself from a fit of abstraction. 'Oh, it isn't the

habit of English Governments to recognise unofficial services. The Geographical Society and other public bodies have done what is usual in such cases, I believe. For the rest, I have heard that Robert Hamersley's methods of dealing with aboriginal populations have been such as might have been anticipated from his antecedents, and that may have stood in the way of his receiving any appointment or honour. He is, as you say, courageous; but he is also utterly unscrupulous—or was. I have not followed his career very closely, so that I don't know whether there is any special reason for his having been ignored by the dispensers of patronage; but if there be, it cannot be connected with the bygone scandal to which I referred just now, and which must have been forgotten by the few survivors amongst those who suspected its existence.'

'I suppose you and he are not upon speaking terms?' said Arthur after another pause.

'I presume that we should speak if we met; but we have not met for many years, and the chances are that we shall never meet again. If I know anything of him, it is in the last degree improbable that he has forgiven me, and it is likewise improbable that he would treat me uncivilly, should we come across one another, for he has remarkable powers of self-command. What made me think of him this evening was the sight of this place and the reminder that there is still a possibility of its passing into his hands. Only my life and yours stand between it and him now.

Perhaps you are not aware that, in the event of my death and yours, without issue, St. Ann's, as well as the personal property of which I now enjoy the income, will revert to him, under my uncle's will.'

Arthur had not been aware of that circumstance, and was momentarily startled by the announcement. At one time Mr. Hamersley's chances would have seemed very remote; for Arthur had had three brothers. But a succession of calamities, which had been partly accountable for Mr. Foley's white hair and furrowed cheeks, had reduced the family to the two men who now sat facing one another; and why should not Death, who had so often stood at their right hand, summon one or both of them away at any moment? Unquestionably such an event might occur; but what then? A dying man, who leaves no children behind him, may surely afford to regard with indifference the ultimate disposition of property which has served its purpose, so far as he has been concerned. Arthur gave utterance to the last of a rapid series of reflections by saying:

'Well, does that so very much matter?'

'It matters or it doesn't matter,' answered his father, with a slight shrug; 'the significance or the insignificance of most things depends upon the point of view from which one surveys them, and your point of view can hardly be the same as mine. In the natural order of events you will survive me, and marry and have children; but I have been taught by bitter experience that events don't always follow their

natural course, and I have to take into account the possibility of my lagging on earth behind the last of my sons. Even then, you will say, I should have every material comfort secured for me, and after me might come the deluge, for anything that I should need to care. Ah, well! I am trying to make excuses for myself, and I see by your face that I am not meeting with much success. You want to leave me, and I don't wonder at it; but perhaps it is not very wonderful, either, that I should want to keep you with me. At least it was not I who prevented you from carrying out your wish and entering the army.'

Arthur looked down, colouring a little. Strictly speaking, it had not been his father who had prevented him from passing the necessary examinations; nevertheless, if his father had seen fit to allow him the educational advantages which most gentlemen's sons enjoy, he might not have been found incapable at the crucial moment. It had not been quite fair upon him to deny him the training of a public school, and although he had, after some hesitation and demur, been sent to Oxford, that concession had been of little service to him as regarded the profession upon which he had fixed his choice. The truth, of course, was that his father did not wish him to enter any profession; and this was the more unreasonable, because his father and he had never been close or intimate companions. He did not, however, risk a renewal of former sterile and

painful discussions by responding to Mr. Foley's indirect challenge; he only remarked, with a laugh:

'I suppose I must make haste to marry and have a large family. Only it's rather desirable to be earning something in the shape of a livelihood before one makes an offer of one's hand and heart, isn't it?'

'There is no necessity for you to earn a livelihood,' returned Mr. Foley sharply. 'All that I have is yours; you know that perfectly well. My own wants are neither numerous nor expensive.'

Arthur replied by an unintelligible murmur, and changed the subject. He did not in the least understand his father, to whom he was only attached by the ties of natural affection (if, indeed, there be such ties), and whom he did not believe to be attached in any other way to him. If the elder man was chiefly to blame—as he undoubtedly was—for this lack of comprehension and lack of love, it was likewise upon the elder man that the chief share of punishment had fallen. In his desolation and bereavement, he had clung to the boy; he had shrunk from parting with him; he had been obdurate when he ought to have yielded, sometimes also he had yielded when it would have been better to be obdurate; and he had never known how to express his feelings or to invite confidence. Oddly enough, his impression was that he had been singularly unselfish. He had, to be sure, kept Arthur with him during the educational period, which had been spent abroad; but for the last three years the young man had been free to visit his college



friends in England, to remain away for months together—to please himself, in short. He was still free to please himself, and the means of so doing should always, within possible limits, be at his disposal; surely it was not asking a great deal of him to require that he should not permanently desert an old man who had but him in the world, and who was not likely to trouble him very long.

Before wishing his son good-night, Mr. Foley deemed it appropriate to remark:

‘This is only an experiment, you know. We aren’t absolutely compelled to live here; though it would be convenient if you were to take a fancy to the place.’

‘Oh, it will be all right, so far as I am concerned,’ answered the young man lightly; ‘it isn’t as if I should be always here. The question is rather whether St. Ann’s will suit you.’

Mr. Foley made no rejoinder; but, when he had reached his bedroom, he said to himself, with a sigh, ‘I hardly know what to wish for. A pretty and virtuous young woman, residing in the neighbourhood, perhaps. Happily he is extremely susceptible, and that solution might do. Then I could refresh myself by a run abroad every now and then, and I suppose they wouldn’t mind letting me have a corner of the house for a studio.’



## CHAPTER II.

## THE CURIOUS COLONEL.

MR. AND MRS. LATIMER, as in duty bound, hastened to call upon their new parishioner, and were received in the drawing-room, which still retained something of the prim, old-maidenly atmosphere belonging to its late proprietress. The Vicar, a stout, elderly, rosy personage in a pepper-and-salt suit, contented himself with smiling amiably, and did not say much ; but the volubility of his spouse prevented the conversation from languishing for a moment.

It was an immense relief to her mind, she began by saying, that St. Ann's was not to remain untenanted. Mr. Foley, she was sure, would understand that to a poor parish like Bridstow an absentee landlord made all the difference in the world, and dear Miss Lee had always been so very kind and generous. Having received a satisfactory answer to this delicate hint, she felt at liberty to turn from business to pleasure, of which she assured Mr. Foley and his son that quite as much was obtainable in the vicinity of Bridstow as in other country neighbourhoods.

'If you care for sport,' she said, 'there is trout-fishing and sea-fishing, besides the otter-hunting ; and, of course, you have shooting of your own, which has been carefully preserved during all these years, I believe. As for society, we can't pretend to be exactly gay, but we are all very friendly together ; and when

Lord Braunton and his mother come down they are most kind and hospitable. Then there is Colonel Meynell, who is a host in himself. Isn't Colonel Meynell a host in himself, Tom ?

The Vicar, on being thus appealed to, laughed and replied : ' Well, my dear, I don't think we must represent Meynell as a frequent host, in the social sense of the term.'

' Oh, he doesn't give dinner-parties, because he can't afford them, and because he can find a better use for his spare money—you know quite well, Tom, that that wasn't what I meant. But you must admit that he has been a perfect godsend to us, and, prejudiced against him as you used to be at first, I have often heard you yourself say that he is one in ten thousand. Just imagine,' she continued, turning to Mr. Foley, ' a man who was in the Guards for years, and who is related to all sorts of grand people, coming down to establish himself in a quiet little fishing-village and devoting the whole of his time and energies to good works ! It sounds like a fairy-tale, doesn't it ?'

' It sounds improbable,' assented Mr. Foley ; ' but I think I have heard of similar cases before. One can never tell what form the malady will take, and I believe it sometimes does take that form—which is certainly preferable to debauchery. Who was the lady ?'

' The lady ?' asked Mrs. Latimer, puzzled for a moment. And then, with a touch of displeasure : ' Oh, dear no ! you are quite mistaken ; there never

was anything of that kind. To begin with, I am quite certain that no woman would ever have jilted Colonel Meynell; added to which, he is neither a young man nor in the least a ladies' man; you would know better than to say such things if you had met him. However, you will meet him soon, I hope, and then you will understand—or, at least, you will see for yourself what he is. Understanding him is different. All I can tell you is that the fishermen simply adore him, and that he has persuaded some of our very worst characters to give up drink and come to church. I'm not answering for his strict orthodoxy; I dare say he is rather too much of a latitudinarian, and, of course, with our large Dissenting population, it was natural enough for Tom to look askance at him, when he first came among us—now, you know you did look askance at him, Tom, and you needn't deny it—but what we can't help acknowledging is that he has succeeded where we failed, and as he comes to church himself, the fishermen come too. No doubt they would be Baptists or Wesleyans if he were a Baptist or a Wesleyan; but that isn't the question.'

'And does this admirable gentleman live all by himself?' inquired Mr. Foley, who had been valiantly swallowing down yawns during Mrs. Latimer's discourse, of which only a small portion has been recorded above.

'No; he has a sister—or rather a half-sister—who keeps house for him in the most charming and romantic little cottage that you ever saw. She is

quite young, and as good as she is pretty. There is a rumour that Lord Braunton—I musn't begin to gossip, though. Now, Tom, we really have trespassed upon Mr. Foley's time long enough. And I'll be sure to send you a statement of our accounts and our deficits to-morrow,' the good lady added reassuringly, as she took leave of the future subscriber.

Mr. Foley, whose thoughts were still running upon the beautiful and virtuous maiden who might, should the fates prove propitious, be utilized for the furtherance of his innocent designs, had pricked up his ears at the mention of Colonel Meynell's half-sister, and was rather sorry that Mrs. Latimer had chosen the very moment when she was becoming interesting to conclude a lengthy visit. As, however, there was a rumour about the girl and Lord Braunton, and as Mrs. Latimer was pretty sure to come back again soon, there was perhaps no great reason to lament the present breach of continuity in her history. In any case, he was now free to yawn—which he did.

'Do you think you will be able to stand this, Arthur?' he asked apprehensively. 'The long and simple annals of the—of the parson and his wife, the squires and squireses who will call upon us and invite us to dinner, and the Methodist Colonel, and all the rest of it? I'm afraid it's an acquired taste, this English country life, though many men seem to have acquired it. Or is it an inherited taste, I wonder? If so, all hope must be abandoned.'

Little hope indeed could there be that Mr. Foley,

who had acquired a taste for Continental life and distant cities, would ever feel at home in his native land; but Arthur, for the time being, was very well contented, and during the next few days he managed to derive as much amusement as he wanted from sailing on the bay and listening to the deliberate, unending talk of the old boatman who accompanied him.

From that ancient mariner he obtained a good deal of information respecting Colonel Meynell, whose habits of life, as briefly described by Mrs. Latimer, had already excited his curiosity. The Colonel, it seemed, was not only a lover of his fellow-men, but had contrived to make himself beloved by them—a result at which philanthropists sometimes fail to arrive. Enough could hardly be said in his praise; although old Jacob Luscombe conscientiously endeavoured to say enough. He had relieved the poor, he had visited the sick, he had reformed the intemperate, he had set up a reading-room for the men, by way of counter-attraction to the public-houses with which Bridstow was superabundantly blessed, he had started cricket and football amongst the lads, and was always ready to join personally in games at which he was more than a match for any of them.

‘And no dratted preachin’ about un neither,’ Jacob added approvingly. ‘What I mean to say, as regards of preachin’ up to church and chapel, it must be submitted to Sundays, as the Lord has so willed it: but it don’t seem to come nat’ral of a weekday, and



the Colonel he's a gentleman just the same as yourself, sir. Lived a fast life in his time too, they do say; though I can't scarcely credit that.'

Arthur drew a mental picture of the man—tall, muscular, hearty, and perhaps a little abrupt in manner; a disciple of Charles Kingsley; the sort of soldier whose biography was quite sure to be written, after his demise, by some appreciative spinster. One thoroughly respects such men; but one isn't particularly keen about cultivating their acquaintance, because they are so terribly apt to mistake rudeness for straightforward sincerity, and to parade their religious beliefs in season and out of season. In reality, however, Colonel Meynell did not belong to a class which is already all but extinct; though he may in some respects have personified its more modern development.

He was pointed out to Arthur, one evening, bowling lobs, on a space of worn grass near the beach, to a gawky shop-assistant, whose comrades, in their shirt-sleeves, were standing around and awaiting their turn of instruction. The Colonel was a wiry little fellow, with iron-gray hair and a moustache which was almost white. He was very much sunburnt; he was clad in flannels and had a silk handkerchief knotted round his waist. It could be seen that his small features were regularly formed, and it might easily be imagined that he had once upon a time been an exceedingly smart and pretty young Guardsman. Something of the calm assurance and swagger (to



use Arthur's inward phrase) of bygone years was still perceptible in his movements and in the ring of his clear, high-pitched voice.

The young man sat down upon a bench, watching him and listening to him while he schooled his awkward squad, which he did with a certain peremptory good-humour that the shop-boys seemed to enjoy. They, too, were wonderfully good-humoured, doing their best to profit by his criticisms, and only laughing at the chaff with which he mercilessly assailed each of them in turn. After a time the course of instruction came to an end, and the instructor walked across the grass towards the bench, where he had left his coat. He turned a pair of keen gray eyes upon its solitary occupant and remarked with a smile: 'Not exactly first-rate cricket, eh?'

'Well, no,' answered Arthur; 'but I should think you were not very far removed from being a first-rate cricketer.' He ventured to add: 'It's awfully good of you to coach these fellows.'

Colonel Meynell, who had taken off his spiked shoes and was lacing his boots, did not acknowledge the compliment; but presently he said, without looking up: 'You might come and lend me a hand sometimes, if you have nothing better to do. And I don't suppose you find very much to do down here.'

'I shall only be too delighted,' Arthur declared.

'All right; you'll find me here any Wednesday or Saturday afternoon about four o'clock; most of the shopkeepers have consented to close early twice a

week during the summer. My name's Meynell; I live a short distance out of Bridstow.'

'Oh, yes, I know,' answered the other; 'I've heard a great deal about you.'

The Colonel laughed, as he raised himself from his stooping posture. 'You couldn't very well have been a week here without having heard a great deal about all the inhabitants,' he observed; 'and, of course, I've heard about you, too. I ought to have called upon your father before this; but the fact is that I've had such a lot to do lately.'

He spoke very like an ordinary individual, and continued to do so after the two men had strolled away together towards the steep path which led through the woods, to their respective abodes. Nevertheless, there was something about him which was not altogether ordinary, and which betrayed itself every now and then in the midst of the information which he imparted to his companion respecting the right flies to use for trout, and the chances of the otter-hounds meeting within reasonable distance in the course of a day or two, and so forth. As, for instance, when he remarked casually:

'This is a sporting neighbourhood, and that's one reason why I chose it. People who decry sport don't seem to understand that it's necessary to drive the Devil away somehow or other, and that a healthy man can hardly manage that without physical fatigue. Killing wild animals is out and out the best remedy; but it can't be thrown open to all classes, or we

should soon have no wild animals left to kill. So one has to fall back upon games.'

'It's awfully good of you,' Arthur began, but stopped short, remembering that he had said that before. After a pause, however, he felt encouraged to resume: 'I wish you would let me join you. I really should like to be of some little use to somebody, and I don't feel as if killing trout, or even otters or partridges, would be quite enough to drive the Devil away from me.'

'Are you going to stay here until the partridge-shooting begins, then?' Colonel Meynell asked, in a tone of some surprise.

'I don't know; I shouldn't wonder. We have no other home, you see, and my father talks as if he wanted me to stay with him always.'

'Oh, he can't be serious. It would be preposterous to keep a young fellow like you kicking his heels in idleness down in the depths of the country from year's end to year's end. Doesn't he mean you to enter any profession?'

This bright-eyed little man had that undefinable gift which most of us would give a good deal to possess, but which is denied to almost all of us. There is no name for it. Neither in expression nor in voice nor in manner was Colonel Meynell what is commonly called a 'sympathetic' person; yet everybody who was brought into contact with him felt instinctively that he would understand whatever might be said to him; and, indeed, he seldom found

any difficulty in understanding either words or speaker. It was, at all events, easy enough to understand Arthur Foley, who, without further invitation, proceeded to relate the tale of his grievances. And certainly it did seem rather hard upon a young man, who asked nothing better than to earn his own living, that so many obstacles should have been thrown in his way. What, he asked, was he to do, at the age of four-and-twenty, now that it was no longer possible for him to become a soldier? Something he was quite determined to do——

‘Because, as you say, it’s preposterous to expect that I should consent to kick my heels down here in idleness for the rest of my days, and it isn’t even as if my father depended upon me in any way for companionship. We aren’t a bit alike in our tastes, and we hardly ever meet except at meals. Only the trouble is that I don’t quite see what profession or occupation remains open to me.’

The Colonel offered no suggestion; he merely remarked:

‘Where there’s a will, there’s pretty generally a way. Meanwhile, since you are so kind as to offer me help, I shall be very much obliged if you will give up an hour or so a week to playing cricket with those chaps. You’ll find them a slack lot—in this moist climate nobody has the energy to care about doing things well—but they won’t cheek you, and after you have got over your first feeling of irritation at their apathy you won’t be able to help liking them.’

‘I’ll gladly do what I can,’ answered Arthur, ‘though I’m anything but a brilliant cricketer myself. But won’t you let me help you in other ways? Because I know that there are other ways in which you work amongst these people.’

‘In the way of Christianizing them, you mean. Ah, that’s a different affair. In order to help me there you would have to be as convinced of the absolute truth of Christianity as I am: otherwise they would very soon stump you out with questions which you couldn’t answer, and then you would do a great deal more harm than good. No, I can’t afford to try experiments in that direction, thank you. Still, a man may be a very good fellow without being a Christian, and I can see by your face that you are a good fellow.’

This last assurance, which was delivered with a pleasant laugh, softened down the antecedent snub, and Arthur took no offence. After all, he was not particularly well qualified to undertake religious teaching, nor would he ever have proposed such a thing if he had not been seized with a sudden and strong fancy for his companion.

During their conversation they had been wandering slowly up the wooded ravine through which one of the trout-streams above mentioned finds its way by a succession of pools and miniature cascades to the sea, and some time ago they had passed the short cut to St. Ann’s. Presently Colonel Meynell said:

‘We’re close to my little cottage. Come in, unless



you're in a hurry, and I'll look up some flies for you. My sister will give us a cup of tea, if she's at home.'

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE PRETTY AND VIRTUOUS ONE.

It was the universal opinion of the late Mr. Meynell's friends that he did a risky and uncalled-for thing when, at the somewhat advanced age of sixty, he saw fit to marry, as his second wife, that very fashionable and fast young woman Lady Margaret Orme; and in this opinion his only son Victor fully concurred. Victor, however, was not consulted in the matter; and as Mr. Meynell died before the following year was out, he had not, perhaps, time to repent of his bargain. His will was considered a rather unfair one; for he bequeathed £15,000 to his son and everything else that he possessed to his widow, forgetting, it must be assumed, to make any provision at all for his infant daughter Rhoda, whose existence, indeed, began only a very few months before his own terminated.

He had been a well-to-do but scarcely a rich man; yet for sixteen years after his death Lady Margaret lived like a rich woman; and so on her demise, which occurred unexpectedly, as the result of a chill contracted in a London ball-room, her executors found that the task of administering her estate would not be



a heavy one. Of the fortune which she had inherited from her husband next to nothing remained ; she had been gaily living upon her principal, and upon what she would have continued to live after its exhaustion might have been an awkward question, had she not solved it by quitting this expensive planet in the nick of time. So far as Lady Margaret herself was concerned, the above solution was, of course, final and satisfactory ; but what, the executors asked, with outspread hands and uplifted brows, was to become of Miss Meynell ? Who was going to take charge of a girl of seventeen, brought up with extravagant tastes, ready to be introduced into society, to all intents and purposes penniless, and probably quite incapable of earning her own subsistence ?

Then it was that Victor Meynell, who was now gray-headed, who had for some years past ceased to be a frequenter of fashionable circles, and who had recently resigned his commission in the Guards, came forward with a proposition which was instantly and gratefully accepted. He had made up his mind, he said, to live henceforth in the country ; if Rhoda would come and keep house for him, the obligation would be mutual, and it was evidently impossible, under existing circumstances, for her to be presented at Court, or to embark upon the kind of career for which she had presumably been destined by her mother. The girl could not, perhaps, have refused ; but, as a matter of fact, she consented with great willingness. Her mother had always kept her in the

background; she was not especially enamoured of London society, so far as she was acquainted with it; and, like many others before her, she had conceived a speedy affection for her half-brother, whom she had not met until then, Lady Margaret having chosen to quarrel with him over the £15,000 appropriated to him as his share of Mr. Meynell's fortune.

So she had now for two years dwelt with him at Moor Cottage, the secluded little residence in the woods above Bridstow which he had purchased for a song; and as her will had soon become completely subservient to his, she was more than contented with a manner of life which most girls would have found a trifle monotonous. To be sure, she had plenty of occupation; the energetic Colonel had taken care to provide her with that by instructing her to do for the young women of the place what he was doing for the young men. She had occasional pleasures, too, and a few mild excitements, such as dances at Branton Towers, organized by the good-natured dowager who presided over Lord Branton's establishment. Of admirers she had as yet had only a few; but that was probably because only a very few bachelors happened to reside in the vicinity. Had there been more bachelors, she would doubtless have been able to claim more victims; for she had the Colonel's good looks, with youth to lend enhancement to them. Her features, like his, were small and refined; her hair was several shades lighter in tint, and if her lips were fuller and less decided in set, the difference, so

far as beauty went, was rather to her advantage. Taking her altogether, she was a remarkably pretty and charming specimen of well-bred English girlhood; and so Arthur Foley thought, when he was presented to her in the cosy little drawing-room, where she was found seated beside a tea-table, awaiting her brother's return.

'I hope you play cricket, Mr. Foley,' she said; 'for Victor will be horribly disappointed in you if you don't. He has set his heart upon getting up a Bridstow eleven, and as soon as he heard about you, he wrote you down as a certain member. At present he has really nobody who can be relied upon to stop a ball, except himself and Mr. Johnson, the curate; and Mr. Johnson is rather a broken reed.'

She spoke quite easily and naturally; evidently she did not suffer from shyness, and was in no way perturbed by the unexpected advent of an eligible youth. Arthur sat down and had a cup of tea, and made appreciative remarks about the charm of her abode, which indeed deserved all that he said in its praise. Surrounded by trees and over-grown with climbing plants, Moor Cottage might perhaps be rather a damp place to live in at certain seasons of the year; but just now it was looking its best, and as the weather was, and had been for the last fortnight, fine and dry, there was no suggestion of chilliness about the cool shade of the little garden outside, where geraniums and begonias and calceolarias had already been bedded out. The stream which babbled

down through the gully within a stone's throw of the latticed windows naturally turned the course of conversation towards trout-fishing, and presently the Colonel withdrew to search for his flybook. Was it quite prudent on his part to leave these two young people together for the best part of a quarter of an hour? The question would undoubtedly have presented itself to any woman, and may have presented itself to him, seeing that necessity had compelled him to assume many of the functions and responsibilities of a woman since he had undertaken his sister's guardianship. If it did so present itself, he probably made reply that they were bound to see a good deal of one another, and might as well begin now as later. Moreover, he had absolute confidence in Rhoda; that is to say that he had absolute confidence in his power to make her do just exactly what he might think best at any given time or under any given circumstances. The Colonel, it must be owned, was a despot, although a benevolent one.

When he returned, with a choice selection of flies in his hand, he found that the destruction of a more determined enemy to trout than any wielder of rod and line was under discussion. Mr. Foley, it seemed, had never seen an otter-hunt, and was dying to take part in one. Was Victor going to be very busy on Monday? Because the otter-hounds were to meet at Ford Bridge that morning, and it would be an opportunity which might not recur for some weeks to come.

The Colonel jerked up his shoulders in answer to his sister's proposal.

'Oh, we'll take him to the meet, if you like,' he said; 'but I'm afraid we shan't be able to show him any sport. You see,' he explained, turning to Arthur, 'these near meets are only a sort of sop to the Bridstow subscribers, who don't care about getting up in the middle of the night and driving eight or ten miles. If you want to kill an otter, it isn't much use to meet at half-past ten. However, you'll get an idea of the thing, and it's just possible that we may find; once or twice in the course of the season they do.'

Arthur jumped eagerly at the offer. For the moment, he was not so consumed with anxiety to see an otter killed as desirous of cultivating further friendly relations with Colonel Meynell and his sister, both of whom had in this brief space of time been privileged to win his heart. During the Colonel's absence he had not been talking of otter-hunting alone; he had profited by the chance accorded to him to ascertain many interesting particulars respecting Miss Meynell's ordinary avocations, and had conceived an enthusiastic admiration for her goodness and unselfishness—not to speak of the admiration which was due as a matter of course to her personal attractions. This does not mean that he had fallen in love with her. As a rule, he did not fall in love with anybody at first sight, although it had been no uncommon experience with him to fall in love on a second or third encounter; for the truth is that he



was by nature enthusiastic and ever ready to pay his tribute of admiration in quarters where admiration seemed to be merited.

At dinner that evening he had a great deal to tell his father about the interesting denizens of Moor Cottage.

‘I don’t know whether they are quite in your line,’ he concluded a prolonged eulogy by saying, ‘but I am sure you will like them, because nobody could help doing that. The Colonel isn’t a bit sanctimonious, you know—doesn’t thrust forward religious topics, or want you to take the pledge, or anything of that kind; and as for Miss Meynell, she really is one’s ideal of what a woman ought to be. As far as I can make out, she gives up fully three-fourths of her time to visiting the sick and making friends with the shop-girls—looking after them, and seeing that they don’t get into mischief, and all that. Quite as a matter of course, too, and without the slightest fuss or ostentation.’

‘I think you mentioned,’ observed Mr. Foley, with a smile, ‘that she was extremely pretty into the bargain. That, I believe, constitutes fully three-fourths of your ideal of what a woman ought to be.’

‘I suppose everybody prefers pretty features to plain ones,’ returned the young man, slightly vexed, for the truth was that he had had numerous transitory love-affairs, and he did not enjoy being reminded of them; ‘but if Miss Meynell were as ugly as sin, the fact would still remain that she has



delightful manners, and that she is the very incarnation of charity.'

'I don't doubt it for a moment,' Mr. Foley declared, 'and I am glad, for her sake as well as for yours, that she is not as ugly as sin.'

He was glad for his own sake also. Providence seemed, for once in a way, to have granted his unspoken prayer, and to have provided him with the precise boon that he would have craved had he felt any confidence in the efficacy of such requests. If only it should prove to be heaven's will or Arthur's destiny that the coming mistress of St. Ann's should be already resident within easy reach of her future abode! He determined to seize an early occasion of making himself acquainted with his neighbours, and for this he had not long to wait.

Mr. Foley, during his long sojourn in foreign lands, had ceased to be a regular church-goer; '*parcus cultor et infrequens*' of Continental chapels and chaplaincies, he had been wont to excuse himself upon various pleas from participating once a week in the spiritual advantages afforded to wandering Britons. But he understood very well that no excuse would be held as justifying such absentment on the part of an English country gentleman in his own parish; so he donned the regulation frock-coat and tall hat on Sunday morning and listened with exemplary patience to good Mr. Latimer's accustomed half-hour of gentle platitude. Mr. Latimer was rather trying, while the singing of the school-children was nothing short of

excruciating ; still, the young lady who presided at the harmonium, and whom he rightly divined to be no other than Miss Meynell, was an agreeable subject for surreptitious study, and it was tolerably evident that Arthur also was of that opinion. Heaven-sent young lady!—even though that rumour respecting Lord Braunton should turn out to be a correct one, it might yet be hoped that she would at least fulfil her mission until the return of the absent nobleman.

The subsequent introduction and brief conversation which took place in the churchyard confirmed Mr. Foley's hopes. While he was exchanging perfunctory civilities with the Colonel, whom he mentally characterized as a very pleasant little man and quite a gentleman, he listened with the other ear to the two young people, and gathered that Arthur was to be at Moor Cottage not a minute later than half-past nine the next morning, in order that his new friends might show him what an otter-hunt was like. Nothing could be more satisfactory ; nor did the repeated and earnest warnings of Miss Meynell that there might very possibly be no otter to hunt seem in any way relevant to the issue.

'I really shan't be at all disappointed if we have a blank day,' Arthur's father heard the young man protesting ; 'we are sure to have a delightful walk, anyhow.'

Mrs. Latimer, bustling up with a little posse of other smiling neighbours in tow, whom she had assembled for presentation to the new-comer put a

stop to further eavesdropping ; but Mr. Foley already knew as much as he cared to know. 'If all goes well, I may count upon Arthur for another six months to come, at any rate,' he said to himself complacently.

In the sense attached to the phrase by Mr. Foley, all was very likely to go well ; for although Arthur was not yet consciously in love with Miss Meynell, he was undoubtedly going to fall in love with her, and it is a certain fact that, as he strode through the woods to keep his rendezvous on the following morning, no thought of immediately quitting the neighbourhood of St. Ann's found a place in his mind.

Colonel and Miss Meynell were waiting for him at the garden gate, the former arrayed in very tightly-fitting blue serge garments, adorned with the hunt button, while the latter wore a short skirt and high boots. Both carried long, iron-shod staves, though they assured him, in answer to his inquiry, that his omission to equip himself with a similar weapon was a matter of small consequence.

'It is twenty chances to one against our seeing an otter to-day,' the Colonel said ; 'and even if we do, your services won't be required. As a general rule, there are only too many volunteers in the field when we meet in this neighbourhood.'

The walk up the stream to Ford Bridge, where the valley widened and the woods became thinner, showing glimpses of moorland beyond, was not a long one, and presently the hounds came in sight, collected

together in the corner of a small meadow, with a field of some thirty persons of both sexes surrounding them. Colonel Meynell at once introduced his young friend to Mr. Nethersole, the master, a wiry, weather-beaten old gentleman, who hastened to say :

‘I’m afraid we shan’t be able to show you any sport this morning, Mr. Foley.’

‘So I am told,’ observed Arthur, laughing; ‘Colonel Meynell hasn’t ceased to impress that upon me ever since he kindly consented to bring me out. But if it’s really such a hopeless business, why are all these people here?’

Mr. Nethersole drew down the corners of his mouth disdainfully.

‘Well, they’re subscribers,’ he answered, ‘and the least we can do is to give them something in return for their guineas every now and then. We can’t give them what isn’t to be had; but we give them a sort of a picnic, and I believe they’re satisfied. Bless you, they don’t come out for the sake of sport; they come to meet one another and to help the girls over hedges, and flirt, and that sort of thing, I suppose. Bridstow, you see, is becoming more and more of a watering-place every year, and these are mere watering-place folks, most of ’em.’

Without feeling that he belonged to the class thus contemptuously designated, Arthur was conscious that his own motives for attending the meet were not wholly and solely of a sporting character; but if Mr. Nethersole’s remarks suggested the idea to him that it

might be rather pleasant than otherwise to assist Miss Meynell in scrambling over fences, he met with the disappointment which he deserved; for that young lady very soon showed him how capable she was of looking after herself. The banks of the stream, where there either was or was said to be a trace of scent, were somewhat precipitous in places; locked gates, thick hedges, and other obstacles, which did not appear to trouble Miss Meynell in the least, had to be surmounted, and Arthur speedily came to the conclusion that the huntsman, who was wading knee-deep through the water, had the best of the fun. There was a good deal of heavy walking; all of it was up-hill; conversation was held in check by shortness of breath; scarcely anybody, except Colonel Meynell, seemed to be watching the hounds, which, indeed, were often concealed from view.

‘Well, Foley,’ said the Colonel, laughing a little, as they came to a halt near a deep pool, ‘what do you think of otter-hunting without an otter? Cheer up; you’ll enjoy it if we find, and if we don’t—well, then you won’t, that’s all. You can’t say I didn’t warn you, though.’

‘I should be enjoying myself now if I were in better training,’ answered Arthur, wiping his forehead. ‘You, I can see, are as hard as nails; but your sister fairly puts me to shame. She hasn’t turned a hair yet.’

‘H’m! she isn’t quite quite as strong as she looks; though, to be sure, she carries no extra flesh.



Besides, she is accustomed to a hilly country, which you, perhaps, are not. Well, Tommy, what's wrong now ?'

This last query was addressed to a youth of tender years, who, although presumably born and bred in a hilly country, was very red in the face and very much out of breath.

' 'Tis crooll stape runnin', sure enough !' he panted, with a slightly reproachful glance at the object of his pursuit. And then : 'If you plaze, sir, would you come and spake to vather ; us can't do nothin' with un—not since last night. And mother said as I was to foller the hotter 'ounds till I found you, and——'

'Drink, again ?' interrupted the Colonel sharply.

'Yes, if you plaze, sir ; and mother says if you'd ha' got un to take the pledge when her wanted you to do't——'

'I must be off,' said the Colonel, cutting short the reproofs of the injured Tommy ; 'this man is game to murder his wife or burn the house down when he is mad with drink, and a hundred pledges wouldn't keep him from an occasional fit of this kind. Very sorry to leave you, Foley ; but there's no help for it. Just look after my sister, will you ? like a good fellow, and see that she doesn't run too far ! She is apt to suffer for it afterwards when she does.'

He was out of sight in less than half a minute, the hob-nailed Tommy labouring along behind him, like a pug in the wake of a grayhound. Arthur at once



approached Miss Meynell, who was talking to some other ladies a short distance off, and who did not seem to be in any way surprised or perturbed by the news of her brother's departure.

'It is old Tom Shinner, I suppose,' she remarked; 'we are always afraid of something dreadful happening in that house. How fortunate that the boy caught Victor!'

'You won't have to go too, will you?' asked Arthur apprehensively.

'Oh no! I could be of no use at present, and Victor wouldn't like it. Besides,' she added, smiling, 'I must stay with the hounds and do the honours of otter-hunting, such as they are, to you.'

Evidently she did not consider that there was anything irregular in their being left together, without a properly qualified chaperon, and it was not for Arthur to complain of a programme to which he entertained no personal objection whatsoever.

## CHAPTER IV.

### A RADICAL NOBLEMAN.

'WOULDN'T you like to smoke?' asked Rhoda Meynell.

She was seated upon a mossy boulder close to the stream, the sunshine, as it fell through the pale green foliage of the beech-trees overhead, making wavering designs of light and shade upon her person.

Arthur Foley, who was stretched at her feet,

answered, 'Oh no, thanks!' in an almost shocked tone. Had he been alone he would certainly have wanted to smoke; had he been in the company of any other lady of his acquaintance, he would probably have requested her permission to do so ere this; but he had an unformulated impression that there would be something akin to profanity in defiling with the fumes of tobacco the air that Miss Meynell honoured by breathing—which shows that he must already have taken long strides in the direction of his predestined goal.

'Please don't hesitate on my account,' said the girl. 'I don't mind it in the least; Victor is a great smoker.'

'You think everything that he does must be right, don't you?' asked Arthur, with a touch of utterly unreasonable jealousy.

They had left the hounds about half an hour before, no prospect of sport having been held out to them by Mr. Nethersole, and were now leisurely making their way homewards. Miss Meynell, however, had scouted the idea of turning back until Arthur, who noticed that she was looking rather pale and tired, had thought of mentioning that her brother had told him not to let her fatigue herself; whereupon she had at once yielded.

'I have never known him do wrong,' she answered simply. 'From things that he has said, I suppose he wasn't always what he is now; but I can't imagine him different, and I don't want to try. Victor is as

near perfection as any mortal man can be, I believe. For my own part, I am quite content to follow him blindly.'

'Comfortable, but dangerous,' was Arthur's sage comment upon this profession of faith. 'One rather envies the devout Romanist who accepts the doctrine of Papal infallibility, but at the same time one can't help pitying him.'

'Oh, you will be just the same as I am when you get to know Victor a little better,' rejoined the girl. 'He is head and shoulders above all the rest of us, and the best thing we can do is to acknowledge it.'

'If he is a head and shoulders taller than you, that would make him just about double my height,' observed Arthur reflectively. 'I'm very small,' he added, by way of explanation, no protest being made against his computed standard of measurement.

'Are you?' asked Miss Meynell, gazing down upon him from her rock, with a smile which betrayed some inward amusement. 'But why should you be small?'

'Because I'm nothing. One can't very well be smaller than zero, can one? Not that it's altogether my fault. I wanted to be a soldier, and I believe I should have been a soldier now, if I had been allowed half a chance. But what is a fellow to do with himself who has been so handicapped as I have?'

It will be perceived that Arthur Foley was rather fond of talking about himself. Perhaps the generality of us have the same taste, and perhaps we should indulge in it more frequently than we do, if

salutary snubs, administered in early life, had not taught us how apt the subject is to pall upon our hearers. Arthur's present hearer, however, was quick-witted enough to understand that she had not to deal with a conceited egotist, kind-hearted enough to take a sympathetic interest in the narrative of his wasted boyhood, and generous enough to give him credit for having done his best in the face of adverse circumstances. Possibly also the advice with which she favoured him, when he had made an end of speaking, was sound.

'If I were you,' said she, 'I would have a talk with Victor; he always sees at a glance what is the right thing to be done. To me it looks rather complicated; because, of course, your father had claims upon you; though I cannot understand his wishing you to lead a useless existence in a little out-of-the-way watering-place.'

Arthur did not concur as cordially as he would have done a few days earlier. Even out-of-the-way watering-places may possess charms—not to speak of opportunities for usefulness. He said:

'After all, your brother lives here, and you wouldn't describe his existence as useless, I presume. What I should like would be to serve under him, as a humble recruit. Do you think he would take me?'

Miss Meynell declined to give any definite assurance upon that point. It was evident that her awe of the Colonel was equal to her affection for him, and that she had been granted no authority to speak in his

name. As soon as she could, she changed the subject and began to talk about the respective advantages of a London and a country life, with the former of which she displayed a familiarity that rather surprised her companion.

‘Are you often in London, then?’ he asked.

‘Not now? but I lived there until my mother died, and since then I have been up once or twice on a visit to Lady Branton, who has been very kind, and who thinks I ought to see something of the world. One can see the world at Bridstow, though; there isn’t such a very immense difference between rich people and poor people—at least, in essentials. Much the same things happen to us all; only we behave rather differently and use rather different language about them when they come to pass.’

‘Lady Branton, I suppose, looks at things from the rich person’s point of view. And Lord Branton—what sort of a man is he?’

‘Very nice indeed; I am sure you will like him, if you are still here when they come down for the summer. He, at all events, doesn’t look at things from the rich person’s point of view; for he is a strong Radical, besides being one of the best landlords in the West of England. Victor has a very high opinion of him.’

‘From which it naturally follows that you have a very high opinion of him. Personally, I must confess that I regard Radical noblemen and landowners with a certain degree of suspicion. Is he young?’

‘Yes,’ answered the girl hesitatingly. And then, in more decided accents : ‘Oh yes, he is quite young, though he doesn’t look so—partly owing to his wearing spectacles, perhaps. Do you know, I think we ought to be moving on. We are very irregular people about meals ; but I don’t want Victor to come in and find nothing ready for him to eat. He is capable of going without food at all, unless he is reminded of it.’

During the downward walk to Moor Cottage, where Miss Meynell took leave of her companion, without inviting him to enter, nothing more was said about Lord Branton ; but Arthur, remembering Mrs. Latimer’s hint, was not wholly free from misgivings with reference to the lord of the manor, though it had been a comfort to hear that he wore spectacles and didn’t look young. Why should Lord Branton’s defective vision and premature antiquity have conveyed any sense of comfort to one who was as yet unacquainted with him ? Arthur did not even ask himself the question. What use is there in asking questions to which the answer is perfectly obvious ? It is as idle to do that as to fight against sentiments and emotions which cannot be controlled. Such, at least, was the opinion of Arthur Foley, who had never tried very hard to control his emotions, and consequently could not know for certain whether they are controllable or not.

It was with sincere satisfaction and some little amusement that his father heard, that evening, how



the young man's day had been spent. Mr. Foley's own day had been a long and rather weary one. He had sketched for an hour or so; he had interviewed the bailiff and the gardener; and the rest of his time had been passed, partly in vain longings for congenial companionship, and partly in the construction of a Spanish castle which was situated, not in Spain, but in Devonshire. As a *piéd à terre*, and as a place in which to lie down and die when one's hour should come, St. Ann's might prove tolerable; but as a permanent residence—*à Dieu ne plaise!* But now, thanks to Arthur's fortunately susceptible temperament, the corner-stone of the above dreamy edifice seemed really to have been laid, and the dreamer was proportionately cheerful. He said:

'I am only too thankful that you have found some people here whom you like. I am not sure that I quite understand what your surprising ex-Guardsman is driving at; but his motives are, doubtless, excellent, and if it amuses you to take part in his crusade, by all manner of means do so. In providing you with amusement he is conferring the greatest possible favour upon me, as well as upon you.'

It was not to his father, whose quiet scepticism chilled him, that Arthur was likely to confide any of the enthusiastic ideas by which his youthful bosom was stirred; but he was thoroughly honest, both in his admiration of Colonel Meynell and in his desire to follow in the footsteps of that practical Christian. If he was also a little bit afraid of being laughed at, he

must be forgiven. Are we not all a little bit afraid of being laughed at when we make tentative efforts towards acting in accordance with the tenets which we profess to hold? But, at all events, there was nothing particularly compromising in playing cricket; and that, it appeared, was the only form of assistance which Colonel Meynell felt disposed as yet to accept at Arthur's hands. For some time after this he met the young fellow almost every day, and treated him with much friendliness; but he was not very communicative, nor did he seem inclined to take Arthur's reiterated offers of help and obedience seriously.

'We'll see about all that later on,' he said one day; 'it isn't as if you were a fixture at Bridstow.'

'But, as I've told you again and again, I don't know that I'm not a fixture,' Arthur returned. 'If I could hear of any chance of employment elsewhere, I'd take it like a shot, only——'

'Oh, there's plenty of employment to be had elsewhere, if you really want it. Meanwhile, you can't do better than exercise your muscles, live sparingly, and say your prayers morning and evening. Not necessarily long prayers, you know; still, it's very important never to omit them.'

This last piece of advice, it should be mentioned, was not volunteered without encouragement. The Colonel had been consulted, had to some extent been confided in, and, having ascertained that his would-be disciple was not troubled with religious doubts, had on several previous occasions responded with the

above brief prescription. Perhaps he preferred example to precept, or perhaps he had no great belief in the young man's stability of purpose. The latter was the conviction which forced itself upon Arthur's mind and which made him feel rather sore at times. Because he really did wish to be of service to his fellow-creatures, and he was sure that he would have entertained the same laudable wish even if Colonel Meynell had not happened to be Rhoda's brother.

Nevertheless, the circumstance that Colonel Meynell was the half-brother of his half-sister earned him a forbearance of which he might otherwise have been deprived by his brusquerie and his occasional irony ; for Arthur was now fully persuaded that he had at last met the one and only woman in the whole world whom he could ever love with his whole heart and soul. He would have been very much annoyed if anyone had reminded him of sundry previous persuasions to a similar effect ; but nobody did remind him of those bygone mistakes, because nobody in the place except his father was cognizant of them, and Mr. Foley knew better than to throw ridicule upon an attachment which he had every reason for regarding with benign approval. For several weeks in succession, therefore, Arthur was a constant visitor at Moor Cottage, where everything led him to believe that he was also a welcome one. Whether Rhoda divined the sentiments with which she had inspired him or not he could not feel sure ; but sometimes he hoped that she did, and it is certain that he neither disguised them

nor was denied opportunities for making them manifest. It was likewise certain that the girl had a friendly feeling for him, and enjoyed a chat with him towards six o'clock in the evening, when her day's work was done and when she had prepared tea for the Colonel, who did not always come home in time to partake of that refreshment.

The Colonel, as it chanced, was not present one fine, warm evening when a friendly chat of the nature above alluded to was interrupted by the advent of an unexpected caller. The identity of this tall, brown-bearded, spectacled man, who appeared suddenly at the garden-gate and advanced towards the veranda where the young people were seated, was at once recognised by Arthur, and it was not altogether pleasant to hear the cry of surprise and delight with which Miss Meynell greeted the intruder.

'Yes, I have induced my mother to leave London a month earlier than usual,' Lord Braunton said, in answer to the first question that he was asked. 'She is in mourning for one of our numerous relations, which put a stop to gaiety for a time, and you know how I hate the season. So, as there wasn't any committee work for me to do, which I couldn't neglect with a clear conscience, we decided to take flight.'

He sat down and had a cup of tea and discoursed, pleasantly enough, about local topics. Clearly, he was upon a footing of easy intimacy with Rhoda Meynell; but his tone, Arthur thought, was not quite that of a lover. In truth, if he had been an actual

or potential lover, he would probably have scented a rival and behaved accordingly; whereas he declared, with every appearance of sincerity, that he was delighted to have found so early an occasion for making his new neighbour's acquaintance.

'You and your father will be an immense acquisition to our small circle,' he was pleased to say. 'We were afraid that you had become hopelessly wedded to foreign life, and that Bridstow would be too humdrum a place to attract you. By the way, it is rather odd that a relation of yours, who has not been in these parts since your great-uncle's death, I believe, should be talking of coming down here for a few weeks now. I think he said that he had never met you; but of course you know him well by reputation, as all the world does—Robert Hamersley, the great traveller. He has been one of the lions of the season, and he is sick of being lionized; besides which, he wants to find some quiet place in which to work at the book that he is going to bring out soon. We couldn't persuade him to take up his quarters with us, I am sorry to say, and my mother has gone to Bridstow this afternoon to make inquiries about lodgings.'

Both Arthur and Miss Meynell were much interested, and had a great many questions to ask about Mr. Hamersley, who, it appeared, was a widower with an only daughter. Lord Branton, it may be assumed, had outgrown the habit of blushing; but he certainly looked rather self-conscious when he



mentioned Miss Hamersley, and his dispassionate commendation of her beauty sounded a trifle overdone. Her mother, he said, had been a South American, and he supposed that she had inherited her mother's looks.

'Mr. Foley ought to be warned,' he added jocularly, 'that all the London young men have fallen down before her like a row of bricks.'

'Including yourself?' Rhoda inquired.

'Am I a London young man? My mother swears that I was born middle-aged, and I can't contradict her. Oh dear no! Miss Hamersley has no favours to spare for the likes of me.'

Arthur may have been mistaken; but the impression which he carried away with him, twenty minutes later, was that Lord Branton was not only enamoured of the beautiful Miss Hamersley, but anxious to emphasize delicately the circumstance that he was not enamoured of Miss Meynell. If so, Lord Branton's taste was probably as bad as his tactics were clumsy; still, it was not for one who had come to the conclusion that he himself adored Miss Meynell, to take umbrage at either.

## CHAPTER V.

### MR. FOLEY IS MADE UNEASY.

ALL his life long Mr. Foley had been a solitary man; and this not so much because he loved solitude as because he had a morbid dread of thrusting himself

upon anyone who might possibly prefer his room to his company. Inevitably, therefore, people who would have been glad enough to see more of him, had taken it for granted that he did not care to see more of them, and his son, amongst others, had been at some unnecessary pains to avoid intruding upon his privacy. They lived together at St. Ann's much as they had always lived when under the same roof, meeting only at meals and talking for the most part, on such occasions, about subjects which had little personal interest for either of them. But Arthur's mention of the Brauntons, and of the friends for whom they had been commissioned to secure lodgings at Bridstow, had the effect of causing the weary-looking old man on the other side of the dinner-table to straighten himself in his chair and open his half-closed eyelids widely.

'Robert Hamersley coming down here!' ejaculated Mr. Foley. 'What can be the meaning of that? what can his object be? I don't like it, Arthur!'

Arthur, in the plenitude of his experience and insight into the sources of human action, thought that Mr. Hamersley's motives were not far to seek. He smilingly stated what his opinion was, and partially reassured his father, who remarked:

'Well, that may be the explanation, no doubt; although it seems strange that he should have selected this time, of all others, for revisiting a place which I remember hearing him swear that he would never set eyes on again. In any event, there

must be some unpleasantness, I am afraid. So Robert has a grown-up daughter, has he? How time flies! Yes; I recollect a report of his marriage in Brazil or Peru, or some such country, and of his wife's death a year or so later. I wonder whether he will speak to me or not? Most likely he will; but unless he has very much changed, I am quite sure that he has not forgiven me.'

'For having stepped into his shoes, do you mean? But I suppose you couldn't help that.'

'I might perhaps have helped doing so. There was, as I told you before, a scandal—a divorce case, in fact—with which Robert was mixed up. I need not give you all the particulars, because the upshot of it was that Robert came off with flying colours, while another man, who was really less guilty, was sacrificed. The fact of his having perjured himself in court doesn't count—there are circumstances under which, I believe, it is held that a man is bound to perjure himself—but the few people who were acquainted with the truth knew very well that, when he did so, he was consulting his own interests, not those of the unfortunate woman whom he could not save, nor those of the scapegoat whom he allowed to suffer in his place. I happened to be one of the few people acquainted with the truth, and when my uncle questioned me, I told him what I knew. Ought I to have held my tongue? That is just what I can't feel quite certain about; but I am perfectly certain that I never expected him to cut Robert adrift, for he was

by no means a strait-laced old gentleman, and he had no great affection for me. However, so it was. He sent for Robert, told him that he had behaved like a scoundrel, turned his back upon him, and never saw him again. Afterwards he made the will that you know of, and then died. His having nominated Robert as his heir, in default of others, looks rather as though he had meant to leave a door open for repentance; it is quite possible that, if he had lived longer, he might have torn up that will and executed a different one. What can't be denied is, that I was instrumental in disinheriting my cousin, and what would surprise me beyond measure would be to hear that my cousin had either forgotten or forgiven that. I must confess that I don't like his coming down here just after our return.'

'I really don't think that his coming here can have any connection with that old story,' Arthur opined. 'After all, what can he do? He can't dispute your title to the property, I suppose?'

'Oh no; he can't do that, or he would have done it long ago. And, as you say, it is a very old story; all the actors in it, except Robert and myself, are dead by this time, I believe. Still'—Mr. Foley paused for a moment, sighed, and then added: 'Well, we shall see.'

The above conversation took place at dessert, and on its conclusion the elder man betook himself to the room which he had fitted up as a studio, and which his son never thought of invading. No further

allusion was made to Mr. Hamersley on the morrow ; but in the course of that afternoon who should drive up to the door to pay a neighbourly call but Mr. Hamersley's noble friend !

Lord Braunton was very neighbourly and very friendly. He said all that the occasion seemed to require, and even a little more ; he rather dexterously avoided touching upon political topics, as to which he could not tell whether his host's views coincided or not with his own ; he mentioned his mother's anxiety to renew acquaintance with one whom she well remembered, but who, she feared, must quite have forgotten her ; and he ended by asking whether Mr. Foley and Arthur would waive ceremony so far as to dine at Braunton Towers the next evening.

'It isn't a dinner-party,' he added ; 'we are in mourning just now, so we can't give formal dinners. But the Latimers and the Meynells have promised to come, and you would do us all a great favour if you would join us.'

Mr. Foley was by no means reluctant to grant the requested favour. Solitary as his temperament had condemned him to be, he had never been unsociable, and he longed to be brought once more into contact with people who at least had seen something of the outer world. For he was far from sharing Miss Meynell's philosophic opinion that there is no very immense difference between one class of human beings and another.

'That is a pleasant-mannered young man,' he



remarked to his son, after their visitor had left them ; ' though he seems to need smartening up a little, and it is a pity that he stoops and wears spectacles. He doesn't take after his mother, whom I recollect perfectly well, and who was a particularly charming and pretty woman in the days of auld lang syne. Ce que c'est que de nous ! I suppose she has a gray head and a yellow, wrinkled skin now, like the rest of us.'

If Lady Braunton's skin had preserved a good deal of the bloom of youth, and if the lines discernible thereon scarcely deserved to be called wrinkled, this was probably because the course of life had been rendered smooth for her, and because she had encountered its occasional asperities in a very different spirit from that manifested by Mr. Foley. Her hair, it is true, was gray, but it was pretty and abundant hair, and she wore it drawn back above her low forehead in a style highly becoming to such ladies of her years as can afford to adopt it. Moreover, she had not her son's noble, or ignoble, contempt for attire, so that the sparkle of diamonds that lit up her black costume, when she rose to receive Mr. Foley before dinner, and the exquisite lace which formed a part of it, appealed at once to that gentleman's artistic sensibilities.

'How delightful it is,' she exclaimed, 'to meet somebody to whom one can talk of things that happened in the fifties and sixties, without being looked upon as an antediluvian ! You and I, Mr.

Foley, remember Bridstow when the nearest railway station was twenty miles away, and when there wasn't an hotel or a lodging-house in the place. Come and sit down, and tell me what you think of all the changes that have been brought about here since we were young.'

'I think the place is wonderfully little changed, Lady Braunton,' her guest replied, with a faint smile. 'Every morning, when I awake and look out of my window across the bay, I remind myself of Rip van Winkle. It is the old scene; but it is occupied by a new set of actors, amongst whom there is no place for me.'

'But indeed there is a place open for you,' Lady Braunton declared, 'and we expect you to fill it.'

'Ah, no; I will only be a spectator, if you please; I have had my day. You, of course, are still qualified to play a prominent and ornamental part; but then you, if I may be permitted to say so, appear to have discovered the secret of perpetual youth.'

Lady Braunton laughed, shrugged her shoulders slightly, and pointed with her fan to the master of the house, to whom she certainly did not seem to have transmitted the valuable discovery ascribed to her.

'Braunton is as old as the hills,' said she; 'so it stands to reason that I must be older. Nevertheless, I don't see why you and I should be contented to rank as ciphers, merely because we happen to have a full-grown son apiece.'

During dinner she explained in more precise terms how little accustomed she was to accept the position of a nonentity; although at the same time she made it innocently and divertingly evident to her hearer that she had no practical control over her son's proceedings. She deplored his Radicalism, but she had not been able to wean him from it; she wished, as a matter of course, to marry him to a girl of her choice, but admitted that her choice, unless it should chance to coincide with his, would have to go to the wall; she even went so far, in the simplicity of her garrulous candour, as to intimate that he had already made his choice, and that she had been compelled to submit to it against her will.

Mr. Foley, for his part, said little—no neighbour of Lady Braunton's was ever called upon to say much—but took mental notes, and drew consolatory conclusions from some of them. After all, it might well be that Robert Hamersley was ambitious of contracting an alliance with a wealthy Radical peer.

Lady Braunton distinctly implied that such was the case, and if he had any other motive for temporarily establishing himself at Bridstow, she evidently was not aware of it. She described him as a most delightful and entertaining companion; she expatiated upon the feats which he had achieved in distant lands, upon his intrepidity and his modesty; it was only by an afterthought that she alluded to his former connection with that neighbourhood, saying:

‘I can’t remember at all what he was like as a young man, though I suppose I must have seen him in the days when your uncle lived at St. Ann’s. Used it not to be said at one time that St. Ann’s would go to him after old Mr. Foley’s death? What a white elephant the place would have been to him with his adventurous tastes and wandering habits!’

Meanwhile, Arthur was not having such an enjoyable time of it as he might have ventured to anticipate, had there been more ladies present. Miss Meynell, to be sure, was seated on his left, but she was obliged to devote herself almost entirely to the entertainment of Mr. Latimer; so that he could only hope for better things later on, and take part, with as good a grace as might be, in the general conversation. This, which was continued after the men had been left to their coffee and cigarettes, was really rather interesting; for the chief speakers were Colonel Meynell and Lord Branton, both of whom said some things which, if not original, struck Arthur as being so. The latter might possibly be justified in affirming, as he did, that to talk about Conservative principles in a country which virtually possesses universal suffrage is to talk nonsense; but it was a little startling to hear the former retort:

‘Universal suffrage may come to mean reaction yet. I grant you that Conservatism just at present is only a name; but there’s no reason why it shouldn’t become a reality again some day, and I am convinced that it very soon would if the men whom you profess

to follow could get a free hand. The average annual return from agricultural land being two per cent., or thereabouts, it is pretty clear that peasant proprietorship will never become an institution in this country, and the only question is whether you wish to abolish yourself and other great land-owners in order to let wealthy mercantile persons step into your shoes. I don't think so badly of you as some of you seem to think of yourselves; I believe the mercantile persons would prove an uncommonly poor substitute for you—and so, you may depend upon it, does Hodge. As for you individually, my dear Branton, everybody knows that you are a model landlord; and why you should be so eager to legislate against your own class I can't imagine.'

'Oh, I'm not a Socialist,' Lord Branton said.

'Of course you are not; and that is just what makes your position so absurdly illogical. You and I know very well that the unequal distribution of wealth is an evil; but neither you nor I nor anybody else has managed to hit as yet upon any practical remedy for the existing state of things. What sense is there in backing up a crew of doctrinaires and demagogues, whom we shall have to fight the moment that they begin trying to give effect to their ideas?'

'I can't oppose the Radicals, even though some of their notions may seem to me visionary,' answered Lord Branton. 'The world moves on, and I think they are moving with it.'



‘Oh, the world moves on; only it don’t follow that the world is moving in the right direction. Humanity has retraced its steps before now. I’ll tell you what humanity in all ages has cried aloud for, and that is discipline. Humanity prefers a bad master to no master at all, and the English people are likely enough to find some bad masters before the next century is out. Compulsory service in the army would be the salvation of us; but I suppose we shan’t get that until the seas gang dry.’

‘What an old martinet you are!’ said Lord Braunton, laughing.

‘No; I’m not a martinet; but it seems to me idiotic and criminal to throw down the reins when you have been placed on the box-seat. The fact is that we don’t half believe what we say we believe, that God has awarded our respective stations to us.’

‘Very true! very true!’ murmured Mr. Latimer, who had hitherto been a little bewildered as to the drift of the discussion, and who welcomed its arrival at a point where a plain man could find solid ground under his feet. ‘And I think, Meynell,’ he added, smiling, ‘that your love of discipline should lead you to sympathize with the poor Anglican parson, who honestly believes that schism is a sin and can’t quite approve of his parishioners attending church and chapel alternately.’

This trailing of a red herring across the scent enabled Lord Braunton to back out of a controversy

in which he might not improbably have been worsted, and presently he rose, saying :

‘For heaven’s sake, let us join the ladies before we quarrel! I thought we had agreed long ago that we were too good friends to run any risk of stirring up *odium theologicum*.’

There is another kind of hatred which is quite as easily stirred up, and which it is almost as difficult to allay ; but poor Lady Braunton, who had never in her life been charged with want of tact, was hardly to blame for the sentiments of bitter indignation which she excited in the breast of Arthur Foley by her conduct that evening. How was she to know that this young fellow had already fallen a victim to fascinations which she had until lately hoped were becoming potent in their influence over her son? How was she to guess that she was being silently anathematized for taking temporary possession of Rhoda Meynell, for sitting beside the girl, holding her hand, and whispering pretty little affectionate phrases into her ear? She was not thinking, and had no reason to think, about Arthur Foley ; she was thinking only of her own disappointment (for she had greatly desired a daughter-in-law who seemed to her in all respects desirable), and of the reparation which she conceived to be due to the deserted one. For there was no denying that Braunton had been very attentive to Miss Meynell, nor was there any use in blinking the fact that he had during the past month been something more than attentive to that beautiful, but not

wholly satisfactory, Hamersley girl. The perversity of men has to be submitted to; but the sympathy of one woman with another may be, and ought to be, displayed delicately when a fitting occasion presents itself. So Lady Braunton purred over Rhoda, while Arthur lent an inattentive ear to the prattle of Mrs. Latimer, who was quite unable to reconcile his apparent indifference to parochial affairs with the commendable zeal he had displayed in placing himself under Colonel Meynell's orders.

'It was rather a long, dull evening, wasn't it?' Arthur said to his father, as they drove away from the door.

'Did you find it dull?' asked the latter. 'Why was that? Ah, yes; I remember now that I saw you looking like a martyr in the clutches of the parsoness. Still, taking them all round, they are pleasant people—quite as pleasant as one could expect to meet with in any country neighbourhood. Don't you think so?'

There was a perceptible ring of anxiety in Mr. Foley's voice, and he heaved a little sigh of relief when his son answered unhesitatingly that the Meynells at least were people whom it might be accounted a stroke of rare good fortune to meet with anywhere.

'And you are beginning to make interests for yourself in the place,' he resumed. 'I can't see why a country gentleman, or the son of a country gentleman, shouldn't make interests for himself in the place where he has to live, and—and be of use to his

fellow-creatures, and so forth. Your friend the Colonel has been reading me a lecture. He chooses to assume that you are eager to embark upon some career or other, and that I am detaining you here for my own selfish ends. I assured him that, so far as I was concerned, you were absolutely free to consult your own inclinations, and I believe you are aware that such is the case.'

There were moments when, despite all his admiration for Colonel Meynell, Arthur felt that that peremptory gentleman was apt to take a little too much upon himself. He forgot that, not so very long before, he had confided to the Colonel what he had at the time regarded as a grievance, and he replied, with a shade of irritation :

'I don't know what need there was for any lecture upon the subject. Naturally, one doesn't wish to be idle and useless; but, as you say, it doesn't necessarily follow that one must be either the one or the other because one's home happens to be at Bridstow.'

'At all events, there is nothing to prevent your going away for a few weeks whenever you feel that you want a change; and I gather that you are not particularly eager to leave home just at present?'

'Not in the least,' answered Arthur with considerable emphasis.

Mr. Foley smiled, under cover of the darkness, and said no more. Colonel Meynell had made him uneasy; but the Colonel evidently had not yet realized

that a very simple and effectual cure was within reach for the restlessness from which an active young man was supposed to be suffering.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE ARRIVAL OF THE HAMERSLEYS.

‘I HOPE that boy isn’t becoming a bore to you,’ Colonel Meynell said compunctiously to his sister one evening, after Arthur Foley, who had, as usual, been drinking tea at Moor Cottage, had disappeared down the glen. ‘I shall be able to take him more off your hands soon; but for the last few days I have been obliged to give up all my spare time to Braunton, who wants to pull down a lot of those condemned houses without delay. Of course they will have to come down, and I’m glad the work is to be taken in hand; only there must be some delay unless there is to be a good deal of hardship and injustice. So I’m looking into individual cases with Braunton—which, fortunately, he doesn’t mind my doing—and that keeps us both pretty busy for the present. Indeed,’ added the Colonel, ‘if Braunton hadn’t been so busy, he would have been up here oftener; he begged me to tell you so.’

‘I haven’t missed him,’ answered Rhoda, laughing; ‘and I shouldn’t call Mr. Foley either a boy or a bore. I thought you were interested in him, Victor. You ought to be; for he is very much interested in you, and in the things that interest you.’



‘Oh, I’m interested in him; I’ll try to find out what he is made of later on. Meanwhile, it’s all right that he should play cricket with the lads and come up to you for his tea; he might be much worse employed. I was only afraid that you were getting rather too large a dose of him.’

Rhoda smiled, and answered, ‘Oh dear no; I like talking to him.’

She did not pride herself on her perspicacity, recognising her brother’s superiority to her in that as in everything else; still, her brother was, after all, a man, while she could hardly have been a woman if she had not guessed both why Arthur Foley came to tea every day and why Lord Braunton abstained from doing so. It may have been also because she was a woman, and because she had made that complete surrender of her will which women sometimes delight to make, that her composure was so little disturbed by either circumstance. If Lord Braunton had asked her to marry him, and if it had been Victor’s wish that she should accept the offer, she would doubtless have accepted him; but as she had no warmer feeling for Lord Braunton than one of sincere liking and respect, she was not hurt by the transfer of allegiance which his mother and he had so considerably taken care that she should divine. As for Arthur Foley—but it was needless to consider seriously the claims of one who probably did not desire to put forward serious claims, and whom Victor would almost certainly scout.

Thus, during several days of sunny weather in succession, Arthur had things all his own way, and was proportionately happy. He did not see much, nor—for reasons which will be easily understood—was he anxious just then to see much, of the Colonel ; but of Rhoda he saw a great deal, and the more he saw of her the more certain did his conviction become that henceforth life without her would not be life at all for him. Yet he was very discreet and circumspect—or, at any rate, imagined that he was so. Not for a moment did he flatter himself that the heart of a girl like Rhoda Meynell could be lightly won ; for the time being it was quite enough to feel satisfied, as he did, that her heart had not been given to any other man, and that she was in no danger of breaking it for Lord Braunton's sake.

So little, indeed, did he now fear Lord Braunton that he generously forgave the latter for at length finding time to run over to Moor Cottage and pay his respects ; though, to be sure, it was a little provoking to have one's daily hour of bliss spoilt by that intrusion. He surrendered his place at Rhoda's elbow to the intruder without making any wry faces over it, and presently—just by way of saying something—asked :

‘ When do you expect my cousin, Robert Hamersley, to arrive ? ’

‘ Oh, they have arrived,’ Lord Braunton answered ; ‘ they came down last night, and I was glad to hear from Mr. Hamersley, whom I saw for a few minutes

this morning, that they aren't displeased with their quarters. I hope you will soon let us have an opportunity of introducing them to you all. Not that you ought to require an introduction to your own relations; but we want the Colonel to know Mr. Hamersley, and—er——'

He glanced half appealingly at Rhoda, who, however, did not deem it incumbent upon her to finish his sentence for him, or to say that she looked forward to the pleasure of making Miss Hamersley's acquaintance. Having been favoured by Lady Braunton with a description of Miss Hamersley, she preferred to talk about the proposed demolition of those tumble-down dwellings which had too long given shelter to the worst class of inhabitants in Bridstow; and perhaps the change of subject was not wholly unwelcome to her visitor. At all events, he had a great deal to say upon it, and as his remarks led to a discussion about the housing of the poor and sanitary reform, which seemed likely to last for a considerable length of time, Arthur ended by making the best of a bad job and taking himself off. It was a spoilt evening; but there was no help for it, and to-morrow evening was only twenty-four hours distant.

Twenty-four hours is a long or a short interval of time, according to circumstances. Looking back afterwards upon the twenty-four hours which ensued, it seemed to Arthur Foley that they had been as eventful as any average year in a man's life is likely

to be, although he certainly did not think so on their expiration, and although, as a matter of fact, they witnessed no more startling occurrence than his first introduction to a couple of relatives upon whom he had felt rather curious to set eyes. It is true that he was momentarily startled when, on reaching home, he was informed that Mr. Hamersley was in the library with his father. He had taken it for granted that Mr. Hamersley would wait to be called upon before calling, and while he crossed the hall, he wondered whether such unconventional haste was to be interpreted as a sign of amity or enmity. But the middle-aged man who rose as he entered the room, holding out a large, powerful, sunburnt hand to him, allayed his nascent misgivings at once.

‘Your father and I have been having a long chat,’ Mr. Hamersley said. ‘I ought to have gone away at least half an hour ago, but I waited on upon the chance of seeing you. Besides, being back again in the old place after so many years gave us a hundred things to talk about, and one grows garrulous in one’s old age, I find.’

He had a singularly pleasant, low-pitched voice. Garrulous he might, perhaps, be; but, judging by his appearance, he was assuredly not entitled to plead old age as an excuse for garrulity. His beard and moustache were, indeed, almost gray; but his thick black hair showed only a few streaks of silver; his thick-set, muscular figure was that of a man in the prime of life, and his eyes, of a pale, indeterminate

hue, were as clear and keen as a hawk's. Arthur looked at him with astonishment, thinking to himself, 'Yet he must be sixty, or not far off it. And, by George, I'd rather keep friends with him than fight him, though I suppose I'm about a head taller than he is!'

He could not help smiling, and Robert Hamersley, who was quick at reading other men's thoughts, smiled back—not ill pleased, it may be, with that unspoken tribute of admiration—while Mr. Foley interposed, with somewhat perfunctory politeness :

'I am sure, my dear Robert, you need not apologize for the length of your visit. On the contrary, I take it as a great kindness on your part to have waived ceremony in this way, and, as I was telling you just now, I should, of course, have gone down to Bridstow to make you—er—welcome, had I been aware of your arrival.'

'Oh, I have knocked about the world too long to be a stickler for ceremony, except when dealing with savages,' returned Mr. Hamersley still smiling. 'Civilized men can afford to save time by dispensing with etiquette.'

He resumed his seat, and began to ask Arthur about the trout-fishing. He remembered having some capital days' sport up the stream long ago, he said, and he had not omitted to bring his rods with him. The young man, a little vexed by his father's manifest lack of cordiality, endeavoured to make amends for it, gave such information as he had it in



his power to give, and mentioned the existence of the otter hounds,

‘Though I’m afraid you’ll think that sort of thing rather poor fun, unless you have better luck than I had the only time I went out with them,’ he added.

But Mr. Hamersley, it appeared, was a true sportsman, inasmuch as he thought no form of sport poor fun, and did not expect to be invariably rewarded for his exertions by a kill. He seemed in his time to have killed every variety of wild animal that is to be found in the mountains, forests, or jungles of two hemispheres; he spoke as though the pursuit of game had been his chief incentive to undertake those journeys whereby he had earned renown, and related a few thrilling experiences of his in a quiet, matter-of-fact way which delighted his juvenile auditor. He was, in truth, the sort of person with whom a juvenile sportsman might very naturally feel delighted; and surely there was nothing sinister about the expression of his broad, open, and somewhat common-place countenance! What if he had been involved in a scandal ages ago? He had been pretty severely punished for his share in it at all events, and the least that the man who had profited by his punishment could do was to accept the olive-branch which he evidently desired to extend.

Mr. Foley may have thought otherwise; Mr. Foley may not have considered Robert Hamersley’s countenance a common-place one (which, indeed, it would not have appeared, but for the heavy moustache

that concealed his mouth), and may have suspected that an olive-branch, held out after so long a lapse of years, was rather a semblance than a reality. In any case he remained coldly and laboriously civil; so that, after he had conducted his cousin to the door, Arthur felt bound to pick up his hat and stroll down the drive with their visitor, by way of removing the taste of that formal leave-taking.

‘Is it too late for you to walk down to Bridstow and be presented to my daughter?’ asked Mr. Hamersley, who had evidently taken a liking for Arthur, and who, if he had noticed the chilliness of his elder cousin’s manner, seemed good-humouredly resolved to ignore such trifles. They had passed beyond the limits of Mr. Foley’s domain by the time that he offered this suggestion, and he interrupted a very graphic description of an encounter with a wounded lioness in order to make it.

‘Oh no, not a bit too late for me; I should like very much, thanks,’ answered Arthur hastily. ‘Well, and did you manage to despatch her, after all?’

‘I shouldn’t have been here to tell the tale unless she had been despatched,’ replied Mr. Hamersley with a smile; ‘but I wasn’t in a position to kill her myself. Luckily my men displayed unusual courage in sticking by me. Between them they broke her spine before she had time to give me the *coup de grace*. The fact is that I had had to shoot one of them for cowardice the day before, and the impression was still fresh upon their minds,’

He spoke of having shot a human being as calmly, and with as little compunction, as one might mention having thrashed a refractory hound. Arthur recollected that subsequently, though he could not recollect to have been much shocked at the time. Everybody knows that it is sometimes justifiable and necessary to put human beings to death, and Robert Hamersley's eager listener was for the moment much more desirous of hearing further lion and tiger stories than of moralizing, or even of being introduced to the young lady of whose beauty Lord and Lady Braunton had given such glowing accounts.

Nevertheless, Arthur was fairly taken aback, and had some ado to repress an admiring ejaculation when the introduction was effected. Lola Hamersley's beauty was so striking, so brilliant, so insolent—if such an adjective be permissible—in its character that it took people's breath away, and only after they had grown a little accustomed to seeing her could they begin to criticise. Even then they could not find much fault with her short, straight nose, her perfectly-formed, if rather full, lips, her magnificent velvety-brown eyes, or her clear olive complexion; but there were some who said that, for all her loveliness, she wasn't quite their style, while others detected, or affirmed that they detected, a certain underlying suggestion of sensuous selfishness, and even of possible savagery, in her habitual expression. Her father, it has been mentioned, did not look like a cruel man (though he had done a good

many cruel things). Lola, who had as yet murdered nobody, and was perhaps not much more selfish than the mass of her neighbours, certainly bore the appearance of being a young lady whom it would be a somewhat hazardous experiment for the average Englishman to take to wife.

Such was the view which Arthur Foley saw reason to adopt later on ; his first interview with her, which was a brief one, left scarcely any other impression upon his mind than one of unqualified admiration. At the moment when Mr. Hamersley and he entered the rather scantily furnished sitting-room which had been engaged for the strangers, with its three windows facing the bathing-machines and the sea, Lord Brainton was in the act of leaving it. His lordship, who must have hurried down from Moor Cottage, looked a trifle disconcerted at being caught, and thought it necessary to explain, for Arthur's benefit, that he had just looked in, on his way home, to ask whether he could do anything to make his friends more comfortable ; but Arthur, who was staring in innocent and undisguised amazement at the great brown eyes of the tall lady in the gorgeous tea-gown, heard not a word of his half-excuses. Presently he was gone ; Mr. Hamersley, having picked up some letters from the table, had retired to the other end of the room to peruse them, and Miss Lola was saying, in a full, rich voice, which had a suspicion of American accent and something more than a suspicion of mockery in it :

‘ So you are the good young cousin ! Come and sit

down, and tell me what it feels like to be a good young man. I have read of good young men; but I don't know that I ever met one before. Lord Braunton, of course—but it seems to be agreed on all hands that he isn't to be called young.'

'Is it agreed upon all hands that I am to be called good?' inquired Arthur. 'I'm much obliged to all hands if it is; but I can't imagine why it should be.'

'Don't you like to be called good?' she returned, yawning. 'Well, you're good-natured, anyhow, or you would have got red in the face and tried to snub me. But it's a fact, isn't it? that you and that Colonel Meynell, about whom Lord Braunton is always talking, are struggling to evangelize the neighbourhood?'

'Oh, I'm not competent to evangelize anybody,' Arthur declared; 'but Colonel Meynell, who is one of the very best fellows that ever breathed, lets me help him a little in the way of providing healthy exercise for the shop-assistants and people of that class. I assure you I'm not a bit ashamed of it,' he added, with a touch of defiance.

Miss Hamersley did not respond to the challenge. She had sunk into a chair beside the open window, and was gazing absently out to sea; to all appearance she had become oblivious of the existence of her visitor. After a minute or two, however, she turned her head suddenly towards him, fixed her languid eyes on his, and said interrogatively:

'Colonel Meynell has a sister, I believe? A pretty sister?'



‘Very pretty and very nice in every way,’ answered Arthur bravely ; but he felt that his colour was rising, and surely it was rather unmerciful of Miss Hamersley to continue her cool scrutiny of him.

‘Ah!’ she said at length, with a quiet smile.

With that significant ejaculation on her part their colloquy came to an end ; for now Mr. Hamersley joined the pair, and nothing more was said that was worth remembering or repeating. Arthur could not stay long, it being high time for him to hasten home and dress for dinner ; but he promised to return soon, and gave that promise with alacrity. Of his newly-found kinsfolk he decidedly preferred the father to the daughter ; yet he had so far fallen under the spell of Lola’s beauty that he felt no resentment against her for what he called her ‘little airs.’ With such a face as that she was entitled to give herself airs and to sneer at good young men, and even to yawn under their noses, if it so pleased her. It was easy to believe that a good young man might consent to become a bad young man for the sake of pleasing her ; but it did not seem at all likely that Lord Braunton’s moral equilibrium would be upset by her sneers or her yawns, and those manifestations were more Lord Braunton’s concern than anybody else’s. A disinterested bystander might thank heaven for a pretty cousin—perhaps also returning thanks in that it was his good-fortune to be already supplied with quite another ideal of perfect womanhood.

## CHAPTER VII.

## LOLA'S CONQUEST.

LORD BRAUNTON, who was no fool, knew as well as anybody, and a good deal better than some people, that in courting Lola Hamersley he was courting peril—not to say possible calamity. Being accustomed to studying his fellow-mortals, and much interested in that study, he was a fairly good judge of character; so that he could hardly cherish any illusion respecting a lady who never took the trouble to disguise either her tastes or her sentiments. Worse than she was wont to make herself out Miss Hamersley might be: there was very little ground for hope that she could be any better. Taking her at what appeared to be her own valuation, she was indolent, self-indulgent, imperfectly educated, and not in the least desirous of adding to her small stock of general information. Nominally, she was a Roman Catholic, because her mother had belonged to that communion; practically, she was irreligious, either because her father professed no creed, or because she did not herself feel the need of one. She had no accomplishments (unless dancing could be accounted as such), no liking for arts or sciences, no every-day resources, and, of course, no politics. The only two things in the world that she hated were physical pain and needless exertion; the only three things that she really loved were fine clothes, jewels and admiration.

'It is as simple as that, you see,' she had smilingly told Lord Branton in the early days of their acquaintanceship, responding almost precisely as above to certain persistent interrogatories of his, and lazily enjoying the bewilderment of one to whom life was full of the most urgent and important interests and problems.

At the time he had not believed her; but subsequently he had come to think that perhaps it really was as simple as that. She was a beautiful creature. In his determination to be quite honest with himself he would have said a beautiful animal, had the passion with which she had inspired him permitted him to use such insulting language; and that was all. Well, if that was all, it was, at least, negative, which was better than being forced to recognise positive vices or failings. A sorry consolation, no doubt, for a man like Lord Branton, who was tremendously in earnest, who was aware of his responsibilities, who had ideas and schemes which he meant to spend his life in carrying out, and who, like other earnest and hard-working persons, sometimes stood in need of sympathy and encouragement; but what is to be done when you have fallen madly in love with a woman utterly unsuited to you? Under such deplorable circumstances any consolation must be made to do, in default of a better. Lord Branton was clear-headed—both his political opponents and his political allies accused him of being likewise pig-headed—he had looked things in the face, had tried to cure him-

self of what he admitted to be an infatuation, had failed, and was now resolved to make Lola Hamersley his wife, if only he could win her consent.

Whether her consent would ever be won or not he was altogether uncertain. Sometimes he hoped, and sometimes his heart misgave him. At all events, he had persuaded her and her father to establish themselves for several months at Bridstow, which seemed promising. Then, too, he had noticed that, although she confessed to a love of admiration, and although she had attracted hosts of admirers in London, she never manifested any special predilection for one of them rather than another, unless it might be for himself. This surprised and comforted him; for his looking-glass told him that, so far as appearance went, he could not hope to compete with any chance of success against handsome and well-dressed young men; consequently, if Lola actually had a preference for him, she must, consciously or unconsciously, have a soul above dress and looks. Oddly enough, it did not occur to him to think of his title or his money in connection with the subject. Personally, he attached no importance at all to the former of these fortuitous adjuncts, and very little to the latter; and so he took no account of an unflattering explanation which would have been the first to suggest itself to the ordinary intelligence.

His mother, naturally, was less obtuse; but at the same time she blamed neither Mr. Hamersley nor the girl for coveting an alliance so eminently desirable.

She herself, to be sure, did not covet an alliance with a Roman Catholic, whose mother might have been, and very likely had been, an unpresentable person; she herself would infinitely have preferred a quiet, well-bred English girl, like Rhoda Meynell. But Braunton was so eccentric and unmanageable! He was quite capable of living and dying a bachelor; there never was the slightest use in opposing him, whereas there might possibly be some use in cheerfully granting him all the rope that he asked for on the present occasion.

'The more he sees of her the less he will like her,' Lady Braunton reflected; 'though there isn't really much to dislike in her, and, if the worst comes to the worst, she will always look and act her part creditably enough—that's one comfort.'

So, on the day succeeding that of Mr. and Miss Hamersley's advent, this amiable and astute lady tripped into her son's study to ask whether there was anybody in particular whom he would like invited to meet them.

'They will dine here to-night, of course,' she said, 'and Helen Hinton and her daughter are coming to us to-day, you know. I thought of sending an appeal to the Foleys, *père et fils*, so as to make an even number. And the Meynells—shall we have the Meynells?'

'I think, perhaps, we won't have the Meynells this time, mother,' answered Lord Braunton, looking up a trifle shamefacedly from the papers upon which he



was engaged. 'Not that I shouldn't be delighted to see them ; but—well, they were here only the other day.'

'Oh yes, I remember that ; but I didn't like to leave them out without consulting you, because you used to be so very much annoyed last year if I ever chanced to omit them from the smallest entertainment.'

Lady Branton derived some satisfaction from the delivery of that little thrust, and was not sorry to see by her son's face that he felt ashamed of himself. Indeed he could not but be aware that he had behaved rather badly to Rhoda Meynell. It was not that he had exactly made love to her, nor, of course, had he the vanity to imagine that she had lost her heart to him ; but he certainly had at one time contemplated asking her to marry him, and he supposed that she was not ignorant either of his former intention or of his present change of purpose. He could not assume that she was in any way disappointed (although most likely she would have accepted him, because her brother would have approved of the match), but it might, without vanity or affectation, be assumed that no daughter of Eve likes to be jilted. Therefore Lord Branton doubted whether a little dinner-party of which Miss Meynell and Miss Hamersley should form two constituent units would prove a very bright success, and he was relieved when his mother left the room, saying that she would send a note over to St. Ann's forthwith.

But it is a hard matter even in London, and a still harder one in the country, to arrange such a little dinner as shall be satisfactory to all the invited guests, and on the present occasion Lord Braunton's contentment was far from being shared by Arthur Foley, who, without any warrant for so doing, had fully expected to meet the only lady in the neighbourhood whom he really wanted to meet. His countenance fell perceptibly when he and his father, arriving rather late, were ushered into the presence of four ladies, of whom Miss Meynell was not one; yet he did not at once abandon all hope, and it was only when he was requested to give his arm to Miss Hinton, a round-faced young woman with a very low dress, and a coiffure somewhat resembling that of a Zulu warrior, that he inwardly and ungallantly ejaculated, 'What a horrid sell!'

Well, at any rate, he was not required to exert himself much for the entertainment of his companion; for soon after she had seated herself at the round table, and had ascertained that he knew none of the smart people whom a young man, in order to be at all worth talking to, ought to know, she turned her plump white shoulder towards him and bestowed the favour of her conversation upon Mr. Hamersley, who occupied the chair on her right. Robert Hamersley, if not a young man, was at least a celebrity; added to which, he was fresh from the fashionable circles that Miss Hinton's soul loved,

and conversant with all the latest scraps of intelligence current therein.

Nevertheless, it was not about the enormous sum which Lord A. was reported to have dropped at Ascot, nor about the true explanation of Lady B.'s abrupt departure for Scotland, nor about that odd story which was being circulated respecting a Hebrew financier and an exalted personage that the great explorer saw fit to talk. He had a few words to say upon these matters when questioned ; but he speedily shifted the subject to one which was more properly his own, and so admirable a talker was he that before the fish had been handed round he had the whole of the small party for his audience. Perhaps he prided himself a little more upon that power of his to attract and retain the general attention which he had exercised in the presence of far larger assemblages during his brief leonine career ; perhaps he was shrewd enough to have discovered that what makes the majority of lions such terrible bores is their modest, but sadly mistaken, reluctance to dwell upon their personal adventures. But more probably it was because fashionable folks interested him very little, and because adventure interested him very much, that he began to relate, in his low, clear voice, wondrous tales of the vast Brazilian forests, of the wild Cordilleras, and of that terrible Australian desert from which he had barely escaped with his life a few years before. For the rest, if he was not obtrusively modest, he was not in the least boastful, nor could

anyone, listening to him, doubt that he was telling the truth, without embellishment or exaggeration. That he was a man of extraordinary courage and determination was so well known to the world that it was needless either to thrust that fact forward or to affect reticence with regard to it; but there was another and a less creditable characteristic of his which incidentally came out again and again in the course of his narrative, and which in the long run made itself apparent not to Mr. Foley alone. Lady Braunton could not repress a little deprecating cry of horror when he calmly told how, on one occasion, he had left three of his companions to die of hunger, after a struggle for their remaining small stock of provisions which had ended in his favour only by reason of his superior strength and their exhaustion.

‘You think that very shocking and unfeeling?’ said he, with a smile. ‘But is not that only because such situations are unusual? We are not called upon every day to decide whether we will sacrifice our own lives or those of other people; but almost every day we consult our own interests at the expense of somebody else’s. Nobody thinks of blaming us for doing so; when the question is one of nations, not of individuals, we are even praised, and called patriotic for doing so.’

‘Only a statesman who acts for the nation is acting on behalf of the others,’ Mr. Foley remarked.

‘Well, he can say *nos*, instead of *ego*, if it is a comfort to him to substitute one word for another.

The principle of self-preservation rules the world, and although, supposing that you and I were tossing about in an open boat together out on the Pacific Ocean, without food and no sail in sight, it would distress me beyond measure to kill and eat you, I have no doubt that I should do it, rather than be killed and eaten by you. And I have every reason to believe that such would be my fate were I to leave matters in your hands, instead of taking the initiative.'

Was there a covert allusion to bygone experiences in the above good-humoured, half-ironical hypothesis? Mr. Foley, no doubt, detected one; for a faint tinge of colour rose slowly to his cheek-bones, and he fell back in his chair, without making any rejoinder.

The brief interval of silence which followed was broken by Lady Braunton's cousin, Mrs. Hinton, a stout, motherly-looking old lady, who asked: 'And what becomes of your daughter when you are exposing yourself to all these horrible dangers in uninhabited regions of the earth, Mr. Hamersley?'

'Ah,' he answered, shaking his head rather regretfully, 'there are no more horrible dangers nor any more uninhabited regions for me nowadays. I'm not as young as I was, and Lola is a good deal older than she was when she was left at a boarding-school in Paris, or with her mother's people at Rio. *La parole est aux jeunes*: I'm the humble servant where I used to be the lord and master, and I don't suppose I should be allowed to set out on a fresh enterprise, even if I had the necessary activity and energy.'



‘Well, of course, your daughter will marry soon,’ Mrs. Hinton began; and then, somewhat maladroitly (for, indeed, the probability that Miss Hamersley would not long remain a spinster was an innocent suggestion enough), checked herself.

A shade of embarrassment was visible upon every countenance, save that of the young lady alluded to, who continued to manipulate her fan with unruffled composure. She was seated on her host’s left, and presently she whispered something to him which neither Arthur nor Mrs. Hinton caught, but which caused the latter to survey the couple through her eyeglasses with an anxious frown. It is not unlikely that Mrs. Hinton, in common with the rest of Lord Braunton’s relatives, was afraid the head of the family might be going to make a very great fool of himself.

However that might be, it seemed to be an actual fact—and a most astonishing fact it appeared to Arthur—that one who had abundantly established his claim to rank as a ruler of men was himself ruled by an indolent, and surely not a very formidable girl. After dinner was over, Mr. Hamersley proved the truth of the assertion which he had previously made, by admitting to his young cousin that he was only at Bridstow because Lola had decided upon that spot for their summer residence.

‘For many reasons,’ he said, ‘I should personally have preferred some other place; but at my time of life one isn’t hard to please, and, as I am writing

another book, I shall not want for occupation. The only question is whether she herself won't find existence in these parts a duller business than she anticipates. With the sea and a trout-stream close at hand, a man can always discover some amusement for himself; but how about the amusements that young ladies require?'

'Well, there are young ladies who manage to get along quite contentedly in this neighbourhood, you know,' Arthur observed.

'There is Miss Meynell, I am told. Very good and very charming, no doubt; but perhaps not quite in Lola's style. By the way, I should like to meet Colonel Meynell; from what Braunton has told me, I should think he must be a fine fellow. Perhaps you'll introduce me to him when you get a chance.'

'I shall be only too delighted,' Arthur declared. But he was not sure that the Colonel would be quite in his cousin's style; and most likely his doubts were painted upon his features, for Mr. Hamersley laughed and said:

'Oh, I'll promise not to hurt your friend's feelings. Heathen as I am, I have a sincere respect for practical Christianity. Christianity exercises a civilizing influence, and, for the present, at all events, it is absolutely indispensable. I am so convinced of that that I have always been careful to refrain from breathing a word against the missionaries, though I have come across a fair sprinkling of missionaries who were not entitled to anybody's respect. By

all accounts, Colonel Meynell is a sportsman, too, which shows that there can't be much amiss with him.'

Now, if Arthur was sorry to hear his cousin describe himself so coolly as a heathen, he could not quarrel with sentiments which appeared to him to be expressed after a very honest and manly fashion; and as for that story about fighting for food with starving men and then leaving them to their fate—well, it certainly was not a pretty story; but, then, as Mr. Hamersley had observed, such terrible dilemmas do not present themselves every day, and until one has been placed in a similar predicament one can hardly tell what one's own conduct would have been. Moreover, there was no reason at all why the survivor should not have held his tongue about the whole affair, had he been so minded.

It was, therefore, with very kindly and cousinly feelings towards the Hamersleys, and not without hopes of eventually establishing a cordial understanding between them and his friends at Moor Cottage, that Arthur betook himself to the drawing-room, where Lola, who was lounging upon a sofa some little distance apart from the other ladies, at once signalled to him to approach her.

'I trust,' said she, when she had drawn away her dress, so as to make room for him upon the sofa, 'that my father has not been committing any more indiscretions since we left you. To relate such horrors to a party of sober, respectable English people—

it was unheard of! But sometimes he can't resist playing the *enfant terrible*. He knew how easy it would be to shock you all, and the temptation was too much for him.'

'I don't think we are so very easily shocked, and I am quite sure that he didn't wish to shock us,' answered Arthur; for, indeed, the young lady's supercilious tone was a little irritating.

'Oh, if you are quite sure, there is no more to be said; you know him, of course, so much better than I do. During your absence,' she went on presently, 'I have been hearing a great deal about these marvellous Meynells—especially about the sister, whom you admire so profoundly. I hadn't heard so much about her before, because my chief informant has been Lord Branton, who seems to prefer singing the praises of the brother. Is that owing to a guilty conscience or to fear of making me jealous, do you think?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' answered Arthur, rather curtly. 'Why should you be jealous of Miss Meynell?'

'Why, indeed! Although I haven't seen her, I am vain enough to believe that I should never have the slightest reason to be jealous of her—or of any other woman.'

'Well, you must be tolerably vain to make such a boast as that,' Arthur could not help exclaiming.

'Not so very,' returned Lola, keeping up the leisurely movement of her fan, and surveying him languidly from beneath her long eyelashes. 'I'm

only vain upon one point ; and, after all, that isn't so much vanity as recognition of what is undeniable. It's a simple fact that I haven't yet met one solitary man whom I couldn't bring to my feet with more or less ease, if I chose to take the trouble.'

'Do you know, I think you have met one now,' said Arthur. For really she had invited this salutary snub, and he felt no compunction about inflicting it.

She was not at all offended ; she only opened those wonderful eyes of hers a little more widely, and displayed her white, regular teeth in a laugh which seemed to denote genuine amusement.

'You really should not be so imprudent !' she said. 'If you go about defying people like that, your challenge will be taken up and you will be punished for your temerity one of these fine days. Just consider what Lord Braunton is ; a more cool, steadfast, and unimpressionable being doesn't exist, even in England. And yet——'

But at this juncture Lord Braunton himself drew near, casting envious glances through his spectacles at the corner of the sofa which Arthur occupied ; so the latter good-naturedly ceded his place and strolled away. He did not particularly care to hear the end of his cousin's unfinished sentence, nor did he admire her taste in proclaiming a conquest which needed no proclamation. Still, he had to admit that there was something curiously disturbing about her, something which might very well cause even a sober sort of man to lose his head, should she choose to exert her latent



powers, and once more he felt humbly thankful that his own love for Rhoda Meynell was a sufficient protection against all the wiles of such enchantresses as Lola Hamersley.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### CRUEL SALLY CRIBBETS.

OF course, Lord Braunton knew very well that, sooner or later, it would be necessary to make the Hamersleys and Meynells acquainted with one another; still, as he was not precisely eager to effect the introduction in person, he was not sorry to hear that Arthur Foley had secured the busy Colonel for a day's trout-fishing with Mr. Hamersley, and that the ladies were to meet at Moor Cottage about tea-time. He himself had to attend quarter-sessions on the appointed day; so that he was compelled to forego the pleasure of joining the party.

Now, it was not altogether without trepidation that Arthur, who had taken some pains to arrange this satisfactory little scheme, set out with his cousin for the pool where Colonel Meynell had agreed to meet them; for the Colonel (who, it appeared, knew all about the celebrated explorer, and had even the air of having heard a thing or two not wholly to the celebrated explorer's advantage) had been rather dry in his manner when first approached, saying that he had a lot of work on hand, and affirming that Arthur

knew the stream by this time quite as well as he did—which was absurd. But very soon after the two men had exchanged greetings it became evident that they would get on together quite as well as need be. Each took a quick, comprehensive survey of the other, and then there was a short talk about the weather and about flies, which speedily placed them upon a footing of mutual understanding and esteem. Whatever may be the sport or pastime in hand, everybody is glad to discover that he has to do with a companion who knows what he is about; moreover, Arthur might have been aware that it was never Colonel Meynell's way to be uncivil to those whom he disliked.

As a matter of fact, the Colonel did not dislike Mr. Hamersley at all. Reasons, or half-formed reasons, he may have had for regretting Mr. Hamersley's presence at Bridstow at that particular moment; but he was not thinking of these while he admired the splendid physique of the deep-chested fisherman on the other side of the stream, nor did they prevent him, when at length it was time to lay aside the rods and partake of a little refreshment, from paying some hearty and sincere compliments to his fellow-angler's skill. This was between two and three o'clock in the afternoon, and the result of the day's labours had so far been highly gratifying.

'It's true,' the Colonel remarked, while he munched his sandwich, 'that we're in luck to get such a sky as this; still, making allowance for that, I think we

may claim to have done middling well, and we ought to do even better this afternoon.'

'I suppose you'll try higher up now,' said Arthur, who, with an unselfishness which, it is to be feared, had scarcely been appreciated, had decided to leave his rod at home that day.

'Oh yes, of course,' replied the Colonel. 'Don't you stay with us if you've had enough of it. We shall see you again between five and six o'clock. And, by the way, perhaps you wouldn't mind telling Rhoda not to keep tea waiting for us, in case we should be late.'

'Well, I was thinking that I might as well be moving slowly down before long,' Arthur admitted. 'I'll leave your message for your sister as I pass the cottage, and then I dare say Miss Hamersley may want me to show her the shortest way up.'

But he reflected with satisfaction that there would be no need to trouble his head about Miss Hamersley yet awhile, as he hurried down through the woods, after quitting the anglers, whom he felt that he might now safely leave to their own devices. Nor was it any great disappointment to him to be informed, on arriving at Moor Cottage, that Miss Meynell had gone out; for he happened to have a pretty shrewd idea of where Miss Meynell was likely to be found. Had she not casually mentioned to him some days before that she had promised to take a party of small children down to the sands that afternoon? And was he not bound to seek her out, lest by any chance her brother's important message should fail to reach her?

Thus it is that, although truly unselfish conduct is always its own reward, an additional recompense is occasionally thrown in by the kind Fates.

He had spoken of moving slowly downwards; but it is hardly necessary to say that he accomplished the distance which separated Moor Cottage from the sea at a rate of speed which would have done no discredit to a professional pedestrian, and after that it did not take him long to reach the sandy cove, where, as he had anticipated, Rhoda Meynell was seated, with her crew of bare-legged brats disporting themselves among the pools and the seaweed-covered rocks around her. These ragamuffins, emancipated for a few hours (heaven only knows by means of what casuistry) from the beneficent sway of the Education Act, were raising such a clamour amongst them that she did not hear the sound of advancing footsteps, and turned an amazed pair of eyes upon Arthur when he accosted her.

'You don't mean to say that you have given it up in disgust!' she exclaimed. 'I was just thinking that you couldn't have had more perfect weather.'

'Oh, that's all right!' the young man answered, dropping into a sitting posture upon the sand by her side; 'they're having grand sport, and they're as happy as possible. But two rods are enough, you know, and, as I wasn't fishing, I thought I would leave them after luncheon. Your brother wanted me to look you up and tell you that perhaps they might not get back to tea very punctually.'

‘Oh, but I hope you haven’t come toiling all this way upon such an unnecessary errand!’ the girl exclaimed in accents of concern; ‘Victor can’t have meant you to do that; he knows quite well that I never expect him until I see him.’

‘Well, you see,’ answered Arthur, who was only momentarily put out of countenance, ‘I should have had to come down to Bridstow anyhow, to act as guide to Miss Hamersley, and from what you said the other day I thought I might very likely find you here. Shall I be in your way if I stay for a bit? Of course my cousin won’t be anything like ready for me yet.’

It is certain that if he had been in Miss Meynell’s way she would have been far too amiable and too polite to tell him so; but she was able, without any violation of her habitual veracity, to assure him that she was very glad to have his company; and for some little time they chatted easily and naturally about this, that and the other—their intercourses having now reached that pleasant stage at which occasional lapses into silence are no longer noticed or guarded against. Arthur, reclining upon his elbow, his head supported by his hand and his straw hat tilted forwards, was very well satisfied to lie there and gaze at her, as she sat with her slim fingers clasped round her knees. The light breeze which was blowing from the sea stirred her brown hair; her profile was clearly cut against the silvery-gray sky, and he could study it as much as he pleased, for her



eyes were seldom removed from her small charges—some of whom, indeed, were so small that it was quite necessary to keep a constant watch upon them.

‘You haven’t told me anything about your cousin yet,’ she remarked presently.

‘Oh, I think you’ll like him; he’s a distinct acquisition. He has seen and done all manner of out-of-the-way things, and he talks about them awfully well, without any swagger or self-assertion——’

‘But I wasn’t thinking of Mr. Hamersley,’ interrupted Rhoda; ‘I meant his daughter. What is she like? Very beautiful, of course; but what besides? Clever?—smartly dressed?—inclined to put up with us and our rustic ways?’

‘Well,’ answered the young man, ‘she is undoubtedly beautiful—quite in a tropical style of beauty; but what she is besides I can hardly tell you. I think she rather goes in for being nothing besides, and having no pretension to cleverness; though every now and then she says things which sound to me clever enough. As for putting up with what you call our rustic ways, I shouldn’t think she would have the cheek to assume any airs of superiority with you. She was pleased to chaff me a little; but I’m glad to say that she didn’t succeed in getting a rise out of me.’

Either Arthur’s sketch was more graphic than he was aware of, or his intonation told tales; for Miss Meynell divined, without putting any further ques-

tions, what was the nature of the chaff to which her brother's disciple had been exposed.

'Well, you know, Mr. Foley,' was her remark, 'that is only what you must expect. One can't take up good works at your age—at least, a man can't—without being laughed at. But I hope you don't mind.'

'Haven't I just been telling you that I don't mind a bit?' returned Arthur, with some pardonable indignation. 'What a poor opinion you must have of me! Mind being laughed at for doing the things that you do, and that your brother does! Not that anybody, except some occasional silly young woman from South America, is at all likely to laugh at me; and not that I'm allowed to do what you and your brother do. That's just it: you neither of you seem to think that I am worthy of the slightest trust or confidence—and that, I must confess, I do mind.'

She turned her face towards him, surprised by his sudden vehemence.

'I don't know why you should say that,' she answered gently. 'I believe Victor trusts you implicitly, and—so do I. But what is it that you want to do? Surely not to preach or to offer up extempore prayer?'

'Well, no; not exactly that,' he admitted, and, chancing to catch her eye, he could not help laughing a little, in spite of his vexation; 'only your brother won't let me be of any real use to him, and now you take it for granted that I must be afraid of ridicule,

although you would never dream of dreading ridicule yourself. It isn't very flattering.'

'Ah, there's all the difference in the world between girls and young men. Nobody thinks it ridiculous in a girl to nurse sick people or to take a number of dirty little children out of the slums where they live for an afternoon. On the contrary, she is praised and admired for her unselfishness. But if you were to hear that some college friend of yours was employing himself in that way, wouldn't you smile? And wouldn't you, perhaps, wonder what his object was?'

'I dare say I might; but that only shows that one is apt to be incredulous and suspicious; it doesn't prove that the other fellow would care a straw what I thought of him. And one thing I can truly say, Miss Meynell, I don't care, and never shall care, a straw what any man or woman in the world may think of my proceedings so long as you don't despise me.'

This was pretty plain speaking; and the words were hardly out of his mouth before Arthur began to feel a little alarmed at his own temerity. He did not, however, appear to have alarmed his companion, who replied simply:

'I should think there was very little danger of your being despised by anybody. All I wanted to make you understand was that you are of great use to us, and that Victor can't very well ask you to do more for him than you are doing. He won't let me do much more, except in the way of nursing, which, of

course, is a woman's business. He himself does preach in a sort of fashion, and sometimes he holds short services for the men who won't go to church or chapel; but he always says that nothing of that kind ought to be attempted by anyone who hasn't invincible faith, besides a thorough comprehension of the people with whom he has to deal. Well, it's no insult to you to say that you haven't been here long enough yet to have taken the measure of our people. They are easy enough to get on with, because of their natural politeness; but they are not so easily understood, and anyone who hasn't been brought up among them is almost sure to offend some of their innumerable prejudices or superstitions—after which he may grow gray in their service, like dear old Mr. Latimer, whom they all respect, without ever being admitted into their confidence.'

'Oh, I know; and, of course, I don't want to undertake work for which I have none of the requisite knowledge or training,' answered Arthur.

He paused, being sensible of some difficulty in stating precisely what he did want; but he was relieved from any immediate necessity for further explanation by the abrupt departure of his auditor, who started to her feet and began running towards a distant ridge of rocks, whence at that moment a loud and piercing screech had arisen.

This cry of distress proceeded from the powerful lungs of Miss Sarah Cribbets, who had just met with a vexatious accident. Notwithstanding certain

infirmities of temper, Sally Cribbets enjoyed a high degree of popular esteem by reason of her remarkable athletic proficiency. Though only in her seventh year, she could turn coach-wheels and stand on her head as well as any boy of double that age. Moreover, she could, or boasted that she could, win a race, running backwards, against any one of her sex and time of life, progressing in the ordinary manner—subject, of course, to reasonable handicap allowances. Now, whether those who had on this occasion arranged such a contest had been influenced by unworthy sentiments of envy or jealousy, or whether they had forgotten to take into account the treacherous nature of the course, which was traversed by lines of low rocks and slippery seaweed, it is impossible, in the face of conflicting evidence, to say; but the deplorable result was that poor Sally, covering her ground in magnificent style, and conscientiously refraining from throwing a glance over her shoulder, fouled a block of sandstone, which jerked her fat legs from under her, flung her high into the air, and landed her, head first, in a pool of salt water where she now sat, rending heaven with her howls and imprecations.

‘She can’t be much hurt, you know, or she wouldn’t be able to make such a terrific row,’ Arthur observed, reassuringly, when Miss Meynell and he reached the spot. ‘Good gracious! what language for an imp of that size to use!’

‘Oh, you mustn’t blame her; they all do it, and



they don't know what the words mean. They have been accustomed to hear them from their infancy,' said Rhoda hurriedly, as she stooped down to lift the vociferous sufferer out of the water.

But Arthur quickly intercepted her. 'Let me do it,' he entreated; 'she'll ruin your dress if you don't stand clear of her. I'll carry her home, and see that she's properly attended to. Where does she live?'

Well, there was not much damage done (except, indeed, to Arthur's trousers), and Miss Sally might very well have walked home. But having heard the gentleman say something about carrying her, she announced her determination of holding him to his word, nor could she by any means be persuaded to release him. Already once that afternoon—so she said in effect—had she been made the victim of a misplaced confidence, and once was enough. As the only result of reasoning with her was to draw from her a renewed series of yells, it was at length judged politic to accede to her wishes; but Rhoda remarked that it was time for them all to be going home now, and that they would go together.

Thus it came to pass that Miss Lola Hamersley, strolling leisurely forth, arrayed in a very exquisite summer costume which she had recently ordered from one of the most renowned of London dressmakers, and making her way across the village street with the intention of keeping her appointment at Moor Cottage, was suddenly confronted by a queer little

procession. First marched Arthur Foley, who bore the dripping Sarah in his arms, and whose anxious countenance showed that he was nervously endeavouring to propitiate his fair burden; next came Rhoda Meynell, with a ragged maiden of twelve or thirteen clinging to either arm; behind her walked sundry dishevelled matrons, who had come to claim their respective offspring, while the rear was brought up by the rank and file of the expedition, dancing and chanting a shrill chorus.

Well, here was a fine opportunity, if ever there was one, for manifesting a good man's sublime indifference to the mockery of thoughtless frivolity; but, somehow or other, Arthur did not avail himself of it. On the contrary, he turned as red as a turkey-cock, and stood still, looking like the prince of fools, while Lola, after staring for a moment, broke out into peal after peal of unrestrained laughter.

## CHAPTER IX.

### RHODA DISAPPOINTS SEVERAL PERSONS.

Now, the worst of it was that Lola's merriment was perfectly genuine and irrepressible. A subdued smile, a polite sneer, perhaps an ironical compliment or two, might have been anticipated, and might also have been endured with comparative equanimity; but that prolonged and open-mouthed hilarity was enough to

enrage the meekest of mankind. It enraged Arthur to such a degree that, after the first shock of the encounter, he almost ceased to feel foolish, and glared at his cousin with a fury which only made her laugh the more.

‘Ought I to beg your pardon?’ she asked, as soon as she was able to speak. ‘Judging by your face, I ought; but, really, I couldn’t help myself. You can’t imagine how funny you looked! So horrified at being caught, and so evidently anxious to bolt down a side street, instead of stepping forward proudly, like the hero of a Sunday book. I presume you have just been imperilling your life to save that interesting infant from a watery grave.’

‘I have been doing no such thing,’ answered Arthur, very snappishly. ‘The child tumbled into a pool and wouldn’t walk home with the others; so somebody had to carry her. It’s excruciatingly funny, no doubt; but, not having your delicate sense of humour, I can’t quite see the point of the joke.’

For an instant Lola’s great dark eyes opened themselves widely and flashed. She was not accustomed to be addressed in that tone, and deep down beneath the surface of her lazy nonchalance there lurked a volcanic temper. But such an insignificant pebble as Arthur had flung into the crater hardly sufficed to call forth an eruption. So she only laughed again, and remarked:

‘I despair of being able to make you see the joke without a mirror. And even then, perhaps——

Meanwhile, won't you introduce me to Miss Meynell? I was on my way to her house; but I am afraid I should have arrived long before my time.'

Rhoda gently disengaged herself from her two attendant damsels, and, stepping forward, held out her hand to the smartly-attired stranger, by whom—contrary, it may be, to the latter's expectation—she was not in the least overawed.

'It is I who am behind my time,' she said; 'I did not notice how late it was, and then we were delayed by Sally's misfortunes. But I can safely dismiss my squad now, and we will go straight up the hill, if you don't mind a rather scrambling walk in those thin shoes. Mr. Foley has been so very kind already that I am sure he will be good enough to carry poor Sally a little farther—any of the girls will show him where her mother lives—and I dare say he will catch us up soon.'

Lola glanced down at her Parisian shoes and then up at the wooded acclivity which she was invited to scale. 'I shall be charmed to do whatever you wish,' she answered; 'but, since we have met, would it not be pleasanter if you were to come to tea with me, instead of my going to you? And you too, as soon as you have accomplished your charitable errand,' she added, nodding at her cousin.

Rhoda assented at once; but Arthur, somewhat sullenly, murmured something about having to go up the hill first, anyhow.

'Oh, you needn't distress yourself about your

muddy trousers,' Miss Hamersley was so kind as to say; 'we won't look at them.'

'I wasn't thinking of my trousers,' returned Arthur (though in truth he had been thinking of them a little); 'but if Miss Meynell isn't going back to the Cottage for tea, I suppose she will want to send a message there, and I had better take it. I can come down here again afterwards if it isn't too late.'

Probably he did not expect to be taken at his word, and Rhoda, of course, protested that she could not think of giving him all that trouble; but, somehow or other, she was drawn away by her new acquaintance in the midst of her protestations, and the upshot was that Arthur was left, without precise instructions, to find his way to the abode of the Cribbets family, whither he was accompanied by a crowd of Sally's companions, who may possibly have looked forward to finishing the day with the crowning diversion of seeing her soundly chastised by her mother for getting her clothes in such a mess.

It was a profoundly humiliated and likewise a very angry young man who might, soon afterwards, have been seen striding up through the woods towards Colonel Meynell's residence. He had got rid of Sally and her horrid little inquisitive friends; he had also got rid of Mrs. Cribbets, whose clamorous indignation he had silenced by the shabby expedient of offering her five shillings to say no more about it; but how was he to silence the reproaches of a scornful and incorruptible conscience? What an ass he had made



of himself! What a superlative, what a despicable, and—worst of all—what an unnecessary ass! He had turned scarlet to the roots of his hair, he had spluttered ridiculously, he had lost his temper, he had made it evident that, in spite of his swagger, he was ashamed to be seen with a ragged child in his arms—and all this because a girl whose opinion he did not value one farthing had been rude enough to burst out laughing in his face. It would have been so simple to turn the tables upon her by ignoring her hilarity altogether, as Rhoda had done—Rhoda, who really and honestly didn't care, who was a long way above caring whether her actions excited merriment or not, and who, as he could not help suspecting, with a sharp twinge of self-contempt, had despatched him on this errand merely out of compassion, and in order to give him a little time in which to recover himself. One must be very young to suffer such torments as Arthur Foley suffered during that rapid up-hill walk of his; but nearly all of us either have suffered or are going to suffer somewhat similar torments, so that we may manage to squeeze out a little pity for him.

Not, of course, that he wanted to be pitied. This was just what he felt to be so intolerable—this certitude that Lola Hamersley, as well as Rhoda Meynell, was sorry for him, and that in all probability the two girls were even now agreeing that he had been punished enough. Well, there was no help for it; what had happened was beyond recall, and

they must pity him or laugh at him or despise him as they might think best. But he was not going back to Bridstow to tea with them. No, he certainly would not do that; he would go straight home, and as soon as possible he would find some occupation that would take him far away from home—some occupation for which he was better fitted than he was for philanthropic and religious work. As for Rhoda, not only was he unworthy of her, but she obviously deemed him so. If she had cared in the least little bit for him, she must have taken either his side or Lola's in that absurd encounter; she could not have remained so coolly and good-humouredly indifferent.

It is scarcely necessary to say that all this prodigious fuss was quite uncalled for, and that the two ladies who had contrived, between them, to reduce a fellow-creature to the verge of despair, were not even thinking about him just then. At the moment Lola was apologizing—though without much appearance of embarrassment or contrition—for the lodging-house tea and the lodging-house bread-and-butter with which they had been supplied.

‘You would have fared much better at home, I know,’ said she; ‘and I also should have fared much better, if I hadn't shirked the walk. But I do so loathe walking! Besides, we can have a comfortable talk by ourselves now. When my father is in the room, nobody else gets much chance of talking; and I dare say your brother is almost as bad—or as good.

It saves trouble, that sort of thing,' added Lola, with a meditative yawn, 'but rather restricts one's opportunities of cultivating fresh acquaintances.'

Nevertheless, it did not seem as if she was prepared to make any great use of her present opportunity, nor, apparently, had she anything particular to talk about. The burden of keeping the conversation alive fell entirely upon Rhoda, who soon reached the end of her list of available topics. What, indeed, was there to be said to a girl who had no rural tastes, who did not pretend to feel the faintest interest in Bridstow or its vicinity, who declined to be drawn into a description of London gaieties, and who would not even grumble at having been deprived of them? It was only the incidental mention of Lord Braunton's name that caused this beautiful and impassive creature to rouse herself a little.

'What an excellent man!' she exclaimed, with her usual half-mocking intonation. 'Clever, too, I am told; though I should never have discovered it for myself, because I am so stupid. Of course, I have discovered that he is silly—like all men, clever and otherwise.'

'Silly?' repeated Rhoda, raising her eyebrows.

'Do you not think so? By all accounts you ought to think so; and I am sure his mother does. But then, as I say, all men are the same, and one must take them as one finds them. Take them or leave them—the latter for choice. I suppose,' continued Lola reflectively, 'it is not quite so pleasant to be

left by them : but that is an experience which hasn't fallen to my lot as yet.'

It was impossible to take this speech, which was delivered in a perfectly cool, matter-of-course tone, as an intentional insult, and for the moment Rhoda felt more disposed to laugh than to be offended. Still, she could think of no appropriate rejoinder, and presently her entertainer resumed :

'The English system of marrying for love is absurd. If only we had all been in France, you would have been Lady Branton by this time; and then—well, then I think I should have amused myself.'

Rhoda coloured a little, and frowned. 'I don't know what might have happened if we had all been French,' she answered; 'but I see no reason why I should have married Lord Branton even then. There has never been any question of such a thing.'

'Oh, there has been a question of it! Ask his mother, if you doubt me. You might even ask your brother, I imagine.'

'I do not wish to ask any questions upon the subject. And may I tell you that what you said just now—about amusing yourself, I mean—is a thing which ladies cannot say in this country? You spoke without thinking, I am sure.'

Lola made a grimace.

'I am rebuked,' she answered, 'and I bow. In future I will think without speaking; that is always the best plan as well as the least troublesome. But you must not take me too literally; my ways of

amusing myself are innocent and *sans conséquence*. So, then, you have no fancy—no little weakness at all for this poor Braunton?’

‘Oh no, none whatever!’ answered Rhoda, who felt that all this was extremely impertinent, yet hardly knew how to stop it.

‘That is a pity. We might have contended for him—it would have passed the time. I should have beaten you; but, if you had wanted him very much, I would have given him back to you before going away. In such affairs I am never ungenerous.’

In spite of herself, Rhoda could not help laughing.

‘I am glad to hear that you are generous,’ said she; ‘I can tell by the evidence of my own senses that you are extraordinarily vain.’

‘So my cousin, Arthur Foley, tells me; but I assure you, as I assured him, that I only boast of one power, and I doubt whether I am really vain of that one. Apropos, what has become of him, I wonder? Can he have gone home in the sulks because I laughed at him?’

Rhoda thought it by no means unlikely that he had. As, however, she did not wish to expose the poor fellow to further ridicule, she only answered:

‘He may have gone home without having been sulky; I am afraid he must have got very wet, carrying that soaking child, and probably he has had to change his clothes. Anyhow, it is high time for me to be going home now.’

She went away with a very decided conviction that



it would never be possible for her to associate upon terms of friendliness with Lola Hamersley. It was not that she objected at all (except on poor Lord Braunton's account) to that boldly announced flirtation, or that she personally resented Lola's challenge. She was very well aware that the other was more than a match for her in respect of looks, and had no ambition to try conclusions against a rival of that kind. But the girl—so she said to herself—was not a lady; men might find her fascinating, because she was so beautiful, but women never could. So, perhaps, all things considered, it was just as well that she wore thin shoes and disliked walking up-hill.

Having thus summarily disposed of Miss Hamersley, and having bestowed a remorseful thought or two upon Arthur Foley, of whose good nature she now began to think that she had taken somewhat undue advantage, Rhoda made her way, at a brisk pace, to Moor Cottage, where the two jolly fishermen were found refreshing themselves with something a little stronger than tea. Very jolly they were, after a memorable day's sport, and Mr. Hamersley, who remained for another quarter of an hour, chatting pleasantly about trout-fishing and sylvan scenery, made a much more favourable impression upon Miss Meynell than his daughter had done. But Victor did not join very heartily in the commendation which she pronounced upon the celebrated traveller after the latter had taken his leave. He said, 'Oh yes, the man is good company,' and then fell into a brown

study, leaving several remarks of his sister's unnoticed.

But the brief description which she presently gave of Lola caused him to rouse himself, and observe :

'Such superlative beauty is a great power, of course; everybody must acknowledge that. Still, I must say I should have thought that if there was a man on earth who was proof against mere appeals to the senses, it was Braunton.'

'Oh, you have heard, then?'

'Hamersley gave me a hint. I might have guessed that they hadn't come here for nothing; but then, as I say, I flattered myself that I knew Braunton better than I do. Has Miss Hamersley been enlightening you? She must be a nice, modest sort of young woman.'

He seemed to be so vexed, and spoke in accents of such unwonted acerbity, that Rhoda thought she had better not report a conversation which, after all, had been more or less of a confidential kind. So she replied evasively that there did not appear to be much mystery about the matter, or desire for mystery on the part of those concerned in it.

'Lady Braunton almost told me in so many words how things were the night that we dined with them,' said she. 'I think something must have been said to Mr. Foley, too.'

The Colonel glanced up sharply. 'Do you mean to say that Lady Braunton approves of the match, then?' he asked.

‘Oh, I don’t know that she quite likes it; but what can she do? Lord Braunton is his own master. There is no engagement yet, though, I believe; and if it ever comes to an engagement—well, I suppose it is better that he should please himself, isn’t it?’

‘I don’t know,’ answered her brother; ‘I haven’t seen the girl yet. Certainly it isn’t always better for a man to please himself at a given moment. He may lose his head and take some step which he will regret for the rest of his life. I wonder Braunton hasn’t spoken to me about this; it would have been more straightforward of him if he had, I think.’

Rhoda looked down, and held her peace. She could not help knowing what this meant, but she sincerely trusted that Lord Braunton would be allowed to keep his own counsel respecting affairs which only concerned himself. She would even have said as much, had it not been at variance alike with her custom and her principles to offer any suggestion to that autocratic little brother of hers. But the Colonel removed all such difficulties from her path by resuming, after a pause :

‘Well, you and I must be straightforward with one another, at any rate. There are things which one doesn’t generally talk about, but one knows them all the same, and sometimes it becomes necessary just to allude to them. Now, tell me honestly, Rhoda—has this business made you unhappy?’

She looked him full in the face with her clear,

truthful eyes, and answered unhesitatingly, 'Not in the slightest degree.'

He could not doubt her sincerity, and, of course, it was a relief to learn that he had been alarming himself without reason; yet he was half provoked with her for being so positive about it.

'That is all right,' said he; 'but I am afraid you may wait long and seek far before you meet with Braunton's equal. Take him all round, he is as good a fellow as there is in England—and, do you know, Rhoda, I used to fancy that that was your opinion of him.'

'So it was, and so it is,' the girl replied; 'but I never could have married him. At least,' she added—for Victor had taught her to be scrupulously exact in her statements—'I am quite sure that I could never marry him now, even if he were to ask me.'

'Because he has allowed himself to be ensnared by Miss Hamersley?'

Oh no; not because of that. I should feel just in the same way if there were no Miss Hamersley in existence. I am glad you asked me about it, Victor; because I couldn't have told you unless I had been asked, and I wanted you to know.'

He opened his lips, as if with the intention of putting some further question to her, but, thinking better of it, closed them again. Perhaps he may have felt that he had already reached the limits of legitimate interrogation.

## CHAPTER X.

## SUMMARY PROCEEDINGS.

It is probably safe to assume that, for every man who hangs himself or cuts his throat, there must be fully a score who quite seriously contemplate that desperate course and who, upon more mature consideration, decide to live a little longer. Arthur Foley, as has been said, returned home from that unlucky encounter of his with his cousin Lola so overwhelmed with mortification, and so persuaded of his unworthiness to take any further share in Miss Meynell's good works, that he could see nothing for it but to throw up everything and quit St. Ann's for good and all. A night's rest, however, made the difference which it usually does make, and the next morning found him in a somewhat less despondent frame of mind. Setting aside the pusillanimity of flight, there were practical difficulties in the way of carrying out such a programme. To begin with, he knew not whither to go; secondly, even supposing that he had been able to fix upon a destination, he would not have known what to do when he reached it; one can't create a career for one's self at a moment's notice. Thirdly, and lastly, it seemed desirable to find out for certain, before burning his ships, whether Rhoda did despise him as much as he deserved to be despised.

Nevertheless, he did not attempt to ascertain his fate by the direct and obvious expedient of applying



at head-quarters. He had not the courage (or, as he preferred to call it in his self-communings, the cheek) to do that, and he spent the greater part of the day, kicking his heels disconsolately about the quays and streets of Bridstow, in the hope that he might chance to come across a lady whose avocations brought her thither on most days of the week. When the church clock struck six he knew that it was useless to wait any longer, and, instead of making for Moor Cottage, he plodded homewards, with bent head, half inclined to believe that Rhoda had purposely kept out of his way.

This was a very bad and sad day, but the next was much worse. For during the night the wind changed, and with the morning came one of those steady, relentless sou'-westers, accompanied by sheets of rain, to which the west coast of England is liable from time to time, even during the finest of summers. It is, of course, possible to go out in such weather, and it is perhaps just a shade better to do so than to stand indoors, watching the rain as it is driven against the window-panes, and the low scud flying across the surface of a dirty green sea; only it stands to reason that you must not go out with the expectation of meeting anybody.

Arthur went out, and got wet through, and met nobody. Then he changed his clothes, taking as long as he could about it, and went downstairs and tried to read a book, which proved to be quite unreadable. Then he wandered through all the empty rooms, and

gazed out of each of the windows in succession, and wished he had never been born. Finally, in despair, he invaded his father's studio, where he was greeted with a sympathetic groan.

Mr. Foley had been trying to paint, but had been compelled by the insufficient light to lay aside his brushes, and was now pacing to and fro, his hands clasped behind his back, and a most woe-begone expression upon his face. 'Isn't it appalling!' he ejaculated. 'And from what I remember of Bridstow, I believe this may go on for days and days together. You may believe me or not, as you like, Arthur, but I am glad—yes, positively glad!—that to-morrow will be Sunday. To-morrow, be the weather what it may, we will go to church. It is our duty to do so, and we won't shirk it, even though it should be necessary to put the servants to some inconvenience and have the brougham out. I don't say that the singing of the school-children is a musical treat or that Latimer is an eloquent speaker; but going to church will at least afford us the consolation of beholding our suffering fellow-creatures. Perhaps, after seeing them, we shan't feel quite so much like Noah and one of his sons, deprived of the remaining members of the family and without the cheering companionship of the menagerie.'

'I suppose other people will come to church?' observed Arthur, brightening up a little.

'Oh, I should say so! I wouldn't answer for the Brauntons; but Colonel and Miss Meynell will be

there, in mackintoshes and thick boots, you may be sure. By-the-bye, why aren't you with them now? I should go and see them or the Hamersleys, if I were you. I'm almost inclined to go and call upon somebody, though I'm only myself. Anything and anybody would be preferable to this!

Arthur hastened to make reply that it didn't do to take too frequent advantage of the kindness of your friends, that he had been up at Moor Cottage almost every day of late, and that his cousins also must, he feared, have seen more than enough of him for the present. 'But I've no doubt they would be delighted to see you,' he added, 'and you would certainly be delighted with Miss Hamersley—from an artistic point of view, that is.'

'Should I? Then I had better reserve the treat for the first fine day; one's artistic perceptions are blunted by such a leaden atmosphere. Besides, I must say that Robert's daughter, as seen by candle-light and in evening-dress, did not strike me as being artistically valuable. Her attitudes were good, and she moved gracefully; but the general effect was a little harsh—strident—meretricious almost, if I may be permitted to use the word between ourselves. To my eyes Miss Meynell is infinitely more attractive.'

But Arthur would not respond to this and other hints which Mr. Foley, who seemed to be in an unusually talkative mood, threw out while he continued to pace up and down the room. He noted, wonder-

ingly, that his father was taking some trouble to entertain him ; he listened, not without amused appreciation, to the shrewd and quaint criticisms upon women and their ways, which the elder man tossed here and there into the current of a desultory discourse, which had art in relation to the human form for its subject ; but he did not for a moment realize what all this meant. He no more guessed that his confidence was being tentatively invited, than he did that Mr. Foley was beset by a perpetual nervous dread lest complications should arise to arrest the progress of an idyll which had opened so auspiciously. The anxious father, therefore, was left to surmise that something was amiss, to trust that it might be no worse than a lovers' quarrel, and to rejoice that, at all events, wet weather did not apparently affect his son as it affected him, with an intense longing to fly the country.

Meanwhile, his gallant efforts to make the time pass were so far rewarded that Arthur remained with him to enliven his solitude, and towards evening they were both cheered up a little by the appearance and slow diffusion of a red glow through the outer mists. Summer gales, like the sorrows of youth, are very bad and look very hopeless while they last ; but they don't, as a rule, last long. Before Arthur went to bed that night he had the satisfaction of seeing the stars shining down out of a cloudless sky, and perhaps, seeing that he had now been miserable for no less than forty-eight hours, it was only natural that

he should accept this as the omen of a brighter morrow.

Well, the morrow, so far as Nature was concerned, proved as bright as could be desired; there was no need for mackintoshes or thick boots; nor could any of the neighbours decently abstain from attending the service of the Established Church, save those who, like Miss Hamersley, professed another form of creed, and the very few who, like her father, had shaken themselves free of creeds altogether. And, of course, the absence of Miss Hamersley was as little a source of regret to Arthur as the presence of Lord and Lady Braunton, accompanied by various smart-looking visitors, was one of pleasure. It was not at those fashionable folks that he peered through his fingers when he ought to have been saying his prayers; it was not their somewhat expressionless countenances that he furtively scanned during Mr. Latimer's protracted homily; and if the calm face which he did so persistently scrutinize betrayed no consciousness of his vicinity—if, when their eyes chanced to meet at last, she immediately averted hers, that did not necessarily imply that she regarded him as beneath notice. At least, he hoped that it did not. On that fresh, sunshiny morning he could not help hoping; he could not believe that his plea to be allowed just one more chance would be disdainfully rejected. He could not, at any rate, think that she would deny him the opportunity of advancing that plea.

His opportunity came to him with so little delay



and so little hindrance that he was in the midst of a most humble and contrite confession before he had well realized his luck in having been left to escort Miss Meynell home. His father had sauntered off with the Braunton Towers people. The Colonel had been buttonholed and led away by Mrs. Latimer ; he himself had lingered until the remainder of the congregation had dispersed and Miss Meynell had closed the harmonium, and now he was walking beside her through the woods, while she listened in silence to his self-denunciation.

‘But indeed I don’t quite understand what it is that you think you have done,’ she said at length, with a look of amused wonder. ‘Your cousin was rather rude, and tried to laugh you out of countenance ; but as you carried Sally Cribbets home in spite of her, and as you gave her practical proof that you were not ashamed of carrying a ragged child——’

‘But that’s just what I didn’t give her,’ interrupted Arthur. ‘Of course I couldn’t drop the child, but I showed as plainly as possible that I was ashamed—and you know I did. Why I should have felt ashamed I can’t explain : I suppose it must have been a sort of temporary insanity, sent upon me as a punishment for my vain boasting. When I’m in my right mind, I don’t care a bit whether my cousin laughs at me or not—as I told you the other day. I don’t really care what anybody thinks of me, except you. And yet I must needs make myself into the perfect picture of a shame-faced idiot before you, of all people in the

world! I can't account for it; I can only implore you to forgive me.'

Rhoda turned a slightly troubled face towards her suppliant. It was true that he had said something very like this once before; but repetition adds emphasis to any statement, however intrinsically absurd, and she felt that it would not do to let him think he could say just exactly what he pleased to her. So she answered:

'I have nothing to forgive you for that I know of, Mr. Foley. As far as I can recollect, you didn't look nearly so foolish as you seem to imagine; but even if you had, that would have been no offence against me, would it?'

'Oh, of course I didn't mean that the fact of my having looked a fool mattered to anybody except myself,' returned Arthur, in a rather injured tone; 'only I wanted—that is, I hoped you might be able to say that you forgave me for having treated you to such a despicable exhibition immediately after I had bragged of my superiority to small weaknesses.'

Rhoda laughed. 'If you say much more about it, I shall begin to think that you are not superior to the weakness of making mountains out of mole-hills,' she remarked. 'After all, it is I, not you, who ought to be apologizing; for I had no business to send you off as I did, to bear the brunt of Mrs. Cribbets' wrath. Oh, and that reminds me to ask how you pacified her. I saw her for a minute yesterday, and she said

you were a real gentleman. I do hope you didn't give her money.'

'Well, I gave her five shillings,' Arthur confessed; 'it seemed the shortest way of stopping her mouth.'

'Five shillings! Now you have set a pretty precedent, and you may apologize to me as much as you like; I shan't attempt to check you. If the garments of every child who chooses to lie down in a pool of salt water are to be appraised at that rate, there won't be a dry thread amongst my entire flock the next time that I take them out.'

Probably Miss Meynell was not sorry to be furnished with this pretext for cutting short vows of penitence which threatened to develop into vows of another nature. Anyhow, she made the most of it, and went on scolding her companion until the Colonel, released at last from the volubility of Mrs. Latimer, caught them up. The Colonel must have walked very fast, and must have intended to catch them up; for, notwithstanding the hard condition in which he always kept himself, he was a little out of breath. And, instead of accompanying the pair on their leisurely progress up the hill, he passed his arm through Arthur's, saying:

'You'll keep your father waiting for lunch if you don't turn, won't you? I'll see you a bit of the way back; I rather want to say a word or two to you.'

This sounded so much more like a command than a suggestion, that Arthur's reluctance to comply with it did not prevent him from doing as he was told. A

minute later he had taken leave of Rhoda, and no sooner was she out of earshot than Colonel Meynell, as his custom was, came straight to the point.

'Foley,' said he, 'I've made a discovery which I ought to have made long before now. At all events, I ought to have known that what has happened was the likeliest thing in the world to happen. I'm not blaming anybody but myself, mind; only it's quite necessary that we should come to an understanding about this. You have lost your heart to my sister; isn't that so?'

Arthur was so taken aback by this sudden and altogether unexpected attack that he simply replied, 'Yes, I have.'

'Ah, well, my dear fellow, it won't do. There's no use in beating about the bush; I must tell you at once that I can't let anything of that sort go on.'

'Why not?' gasped Arthur, still half stupefied.

'Why, because you have no position and no profession, and because, if you'll excuse my saying so, you are nothing but a boy. Don't tell me that your father would make you a sufficient allowance to marry upon. He might, or he might not, be so unwise; but if he were to allow you two thousand a year, that wouldn't affect my decision for a moment. I don't want Rhoda to be a rich woman—neither she nor I value the luxuries of life—but I do want her, when she marries, to take a man whose character is formed, and who has shown in some unmistakable manner or other what he is made of. You, for the present, are

an unknown quantity, and the chances are that you will remain an unknown quantity for a good many years to come. That's why I say that you won't do: it isn't that I dislike you, or think badly of you.'

Arthur had by this time so far collected his scattered wits that he was able to remark:

'If everybody held your views, there would be very few marriages. I haven't spoken—I haven't thought of daring to speak to Miss Meynell yet.'

'I should think not!' interjected the Colonel.

'No; but supposing that I had spoken, and supposing that—well, that she hadn't refused me, it would be rather hard lines, surely, that I should be sent to the right-about by you for no other reason than that I may turn out to be a scoundrel some day. Because that's what you mean, I presume.'

'You may call it hard lines, if you like. I dare say I should have called it hard lines at your age. But you see, it's my duty to think of my sister rather than of you, and if I have to be hard upon you, I can't help it. Not that, in my opinion, you are at all likely to turn out a scoundrel; you're much more likely to turn out a useless and comparatively harmless member of the community. However, I don't pretend to prophesy what you are going to be. If you won't quarrel with me for my brutality, I'll try and help you to be something or other.'

Arthur's eyes brightened. 'Do you mean that, though you couldn't approve of your sister's marrying me now, you wouldn't oppose an engagement after



you were a little better acquainted with me?' he asked. 'You know, Colonel, it isn't my fault that we aren't better acquainted. Heaven knows I don't want to quarrel with you, and I've done all I could to convince you that the very last thing I wish to be is a useless member of the community; but it seems to me that you have snubbed me from the first, and I can't quite see why.'

'Have I snubbed you? I didn't intend to do that; but when one sees a man gaily trotting up to a six-foot wall, with the idea of clearing it at one bound, it's only common charity to stand in front of him and wave one's arms. No, my dear fellow, I can't give the conditional promise that you're trying to extort from me. It wouldn't be fair to Rhoda, and I'm not sure that it would even be fair to you.'

'But what is it that you demand, then?' Arthur asked despairingly. 'Are you forbidding me to see your sister again?'

The Colonel smiled. 'Oh no; I'm not such an ass as to issue orders which I could hardly enforce, and what I have said is rather a warning than a prohibition. Certainly, if I were you, I shouldn't stay here much longer. I should take up some profession or trade, whether my father encouraged me or not, and I should endeavour to become a man. But that's merely advice. I can't drive you out of the place, and I don't wish to cause general discomfort by asking you to cease your visits to us; only, after what I have thought it right to say, I am sure I may

trust you to exercise a little self-denial. My sister, I know, looks upon you as a real friend, and you can't wish to distress and annoy her by letting her see that you would like to be something more.'

'Am I bound to take your word for it that she would be distressed and annoyed if she were to find out that I loved her? Very likely she doesn't care a bit for me. I don't suppose she does care a bit; still, nothing is absolutely impossible, and——'

'Oh, excuse me; there are plenty of impossibilities, moral and physical. It isn't a question of whether Rhoda is right or wrong, wise or foolish, in taking her cue from me in all things; but you must have noticed that she does so, and I have told you candidly what my views are. Now I must be off. I haven't been particularly tender with you, I know; but what is the good of tenderness when an operation has to be performed? The kindest thing to do is to get it over quickly, and have done with it.'

So saying, the Colonel nodded a farewell, turned on his heel, and was soon out of sight.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE PRIVILEGES OF RELATIONSHIP.

COLONEL MEYNELL, as will have been gathered from his method of dealing with a potential brother-in-law whom he considered ineligible, had the defects belonging to his good qualities. It is all very well to

be honest and downright, to make no mystery about your wishes, and even, when the occasion seems to require it, to state your intentions peremptorily; but unless you happen to be the Chief of the State in an absolute monarchy, such a line of conduct is open to the objection that it challenges resistance. He had, indeed, mentioned that his words were to be taken rather as a warning than as a prohibition; but he had not forgotten to add that his sister was completely under his control, and it was, therefore, hardly to be wondered at that Arthur Foley, marching off towards St. Ann's with knitted brows and flushed cheeks, should have muttered to himself, 'We'll see about that!'

What man with an ounce of spirit in him would submit to be brushed aside after that cool, incidental fashion?—as though he and his pretensions were scarcely worthy of being seriously discussed! 'It may suit him to call me a boy and treat me like a boy,' Arthur thought; 'but I'm not bound to accept any position that he is pleased to assign to me, and if I am to be dismissed, it shall not be by him. Of course he has a right to raise objections, and of course it is against me that I have no profession, for the present, and no money of my own; still, I have a right to ask Rhoda whether she thinks those objections insuperable. In short, I have a right to ask her whether she loves me or not.'

Perhaps he had; but was the exercise of that right likely to bring him anything save swift discomfiture?

Had Rhoda ever given him the faintest excuse for imagining that she loved him? Had the Colonel been over-boastful in asserting that it was her habit to take her cue from her despotic brother in all things? Arthur had to answer these questions in the negative, and very galling it was to him to be compelled to do so. He was not beaten yet, and he did not mean to yield tamely without a struggle; only he knew that it would be sheer madness to descend forthwith into the lists and invite his own overthrow. He had not counted upon being discovered so soon: he had looked forward to a prolonged courtship and a gradual winning—if that might be—of the love which he could not flatter himself that he had as yet even begun to win.

Well, he had made no promises, he had undertaken no obligations, he was free to come and go, as heretofore. But perhaps what galled him rather more than the somewhat disdainful disregard which had been shown of such precautions, and what irritated him a little against Rhoda herself, as well as against the Colonel, was his conviction that, with her, her brother would always come first. Happen what might, she would never disobey that infallible being; she would always think that he must be right. Then, too, recalling their interrupted colloquy, it seemed to him that, for all her kindness, she had made almost too light of what had been a serious matter enough to him. He would have been better pleased if she had

confessed to having been disappointed in him, and had then accorded him her pardon.

‘But there it is!’ ejaculated Arthur, flicking angrily at the wayside bracken with his stick; ‘the Colonel is quite right; she takes her cue from him, and thinks what he thinks. I dare say he speaks to her of me as a boy, and she sets me down as a boy accordingly. Not a bad sort of boy, perhaps, but far too juvenile to be contemplated in the light of a possible lover or husband. It’s really rather ridiculous, considering what my actual age is!’

Thus it was in a mental state of mortification and rebellion, as well as discouragement, that Arthur sat down to partake of the cold luncheon which the servants at St. Ann’s had reluctantly consented to substitute for the cold Sunday dinner of the late Miss Lee’s regime. Mr. Foley, cheered by the change in the weather and reassured by the young man’s tardy arrival, the cause of which he rightly divined, was inclined to be chatty, and had a good deal to say about Lady Braunton’s visitors, to several of whom he had been introduced; but Arthur could neither listen nor respond. He replied absent-mindedly or at cross-purposes, and at length startled his father by asking abruptly:

‘What does one do to get the agency of an estate? Does it require a long apprenticeship and knowledge of farming and all that sort of thing?’

‘I should think it did, but, really, I can’t give you much information upon the subject; I have lived so



long out of England, and I know so little about the way in which large estates are managed,' answered Mr. Foley, looking very blank. 'Surely you haven't taken it into your head that you would like to be somebody's agent!'

'Oh, it was only an idea; I dare say it was an absurd one. As you know, I should like to be something, and there are so very few things that I can be now!'

Mr. Foley sighed and shifted uneasily in his chair.

'I suppose,' he began, 'Colonel Meynell has been saying something to unsettle your mind. Well, Colonel Meynell is an exceedingly wise personage, no doubt; still——'

'I don't think he is so exceptionally wise,' interrupted Arthur, 'and certainly he has been saying nothing to me this morning beyond what any fool might say. It doesn't take a Solomon to discover that a man who has no calling hardly deserves to be called a man.'

He repented of his rudeness and petulance as soon as he had retreated into the garden and had lighted a cigarette; he was not given to breaking out after that fashion, and he recognised the futility of such outbreaks. But he did not return to the house and apologize, because that, he thought, would have been more futile still. He could not apologize without explaining, and most assuredly he couldn't explain.

After gazing discontentedly for some little time at the charming prospect of sea and coast which lay

beneath him, and after mentally surveying his own prospects, which were entirely devoid of charm, he decided all of a sudden that he would walk down to Bridstow and call on the Hamersleys. He no longer dreaded Lola's mockery, and he was in such a combative mood that he asked for nothing better than to be attacked by her, and to show his teeth in acknowledgment of her attack. Did she, by any chance, imagine that she had frightened him away?

If she was under that erroneous impression, she considerably refrained from intimating as much when, about half an hour later, he was admitted to her presence. He found her extended at full length upon a couch, fanning herself languidly, as usual, and she stretched out her hand to him without otherwise altering her posture. Having pointed to a chair and requested him to put his hat and stick somewhere out of sight, she inquired :

‘Is this strictly in accordance with *les convenances* ? I only ask from ignorance, and because I hope, rather against hope, that it isn't. In France it wouldn't be permissible at all. I am all alone, you see ; for my father couldn't prevail upon me to go up to Branton Towers with him, and it is scandalous perhaps that I should receive a young man in his absence ?’

Arthur replied that it wasn't in the least scandalous ; in England it was always an understood thing that cousinship implied all sorts of rights and privileges.

‘So I feared. It is a pity ; because, for my own part, *j'aime mieux les plats poivres*. However, one

must take what one can get. Even a rice pudding is better than no food at all, and I was almost regretting, when you came in, that I had declined that dusty walk. For the rest, I know that you have a taste for rice puddings.'

'What makes you say that, Miss Hamersley? Arthur asked, bristling up in readiness for the fray.

'Why not Lola? Surely, amongst their other privileges, cousins are permitted to address one another by their Christian names. I intend, anyhow, to call you by yours. Arthur—it is a pretty name.' She repeated it several times, using the English and French pronunciation alternately, and, in truth, it had so pretty a sound, coming from her lips, that its owner, for some reason or other, felt the beating of his heart accelerated as he listened to it.

Doubtless that was why he straightened himself in his chair and said briskly:

'Well, it doesn't much matter what you call me; for I suppose you find it as easy to laugh at an Arthur as at a Tom, Dick, or Harry. My chief reason for coming here this afternoon was to tell you that you will be at liberty to laugh at me as much as ever you choose in the future. You won't score a second time as you did the other day.'

She turned her great languid eyes upon him.

'So you have plodded down in the heat and the dust only to tell me that. What a compliment! and what a proof of genuine indifference!'

‘Well, I wanted to know you,’ answered Arthur, slightly disconcerted. ‘Naturally, I didn’t like being made to look as if I was ashamed of what I was doing; but I wasn’t really ashamed of it, and I dare say I shouldn’t have looked so, if I hadn’t been taken by surprise. Next time I shall be prepared for you; I shall know that it is your habit, when you chance upon any friend of yours performing an act of ordinary humanity, to greet him with loud guffaws.’

‘*Allons—bon!* If that is a specimen of cousinly language, we shall amuse ourselves together, you and I. Never before have I heard my laughter described as a guffaw; on the contrary, I have always been given to understand that its heartiness and silvery ring atoned to some extent for its rarity. With you in the neighbourhood, it will soon be free of the reproach of being rare, please Heaven!’

Then, without allowing him time to utter the sharp rejoinder which was on the tip of his tongue, she swiftly changed her tone and her tactics.

‘There, that is enough!’ she cried. ‘We are not a couple of children to settle our disputes by slapping one another’s faces, and then embracing—unfortunately. What amends can I make? I own that I behaved abominably, shamefully, and that there was no excuse for me. Will that do?’

She swung her feet off the sofa and faced him in a sitting posture, placing the tips of her white fingers together and smiling upon him. In that attitude she was irresistibly lovely. The senses of no man, how-

ever heart-whole, could have failed to be reached in some degree by the witchery of her beauty, and Arthur, as has been mentioned before, was rather more liable to be affected by such influences than the ordinary run of youths. Of course he accepted her apology; of course he, on his side, had to ask pardon for his roughness and his readiness to take offence. He was confused, gratified, perhaps a little dazzled; and all the time he knew perfectly well that she was making a fool of him again, or trying to make a fool of him—though, to be sure, this was a more excellent way than the other.

After a few seconds she removed her eyes from his (he had an odd sensation of being released as she did so), and resumed her recumbent pose.

‘And now,’ said she, ‘shall I tell you something which will put the finishing-touch to your good-humour? I did not laugh at you that day because you appeared to me ridiculous—far from it! To speak truthfully, I thought you looked very tall and strong and handsome, carrying that disabled child—quite a study for a picture. No; I laughed in the hope of vexing your priggish little friend, Miss Meynell. You will allow that she is priggish.’

‘No, I won’t; and I don’t think you succeeded in vexing her, either,’ returned Arthur loyally.

‘No, I was not successful; it was a false move. Nevertheless she is a prig, and it is silly of you to adore her. Women of her sort were never made to be adored.’



'I don't know,' Arthur began, 'why you should take it for granted——'

'Oh, come, since we are cousins, let us at least be frank! After all, if I grudge her her lover, it is not because I covet him for myself. You have already told me that I have no fascinations for you—*c'est entendu!* But I like you well enough to be sorry that you should worship a cold little saint who is only fit for a stained-glass window, and who, besides, has neither will nor feelings of her own. She is a devout Catholic who has lost her way; the mere shadow and echo of her brother, who will always be her spiritual director.'

'You don't know much about her,' observed Arthur quietly.

But although he was resolved neither to discuss Miss Meynell behind her back nor, so far as in him lay, to permit any discussion of her in his presence, he could not help feeling that the above criticism was justified by facts. Perhaps also he was unconsciously flattered by the interest which his cousin took in him and by the very evident exertions which she was making for his entertainment. Seldom, indeed, was it—and this he already half knew and half conjectured—that Lola troubled herself to talk as much as she did that afternoon.

For the rest, she soon quitted a subject upon which she had said all that could be usefully or prudently said at the time. She began to tell him about her experiences of London society, about life at distant

Rio, about the humours of a Parisian boarding-school, and the occasional escapades which had rendered her sojourn at one of those establishments memorable to herself and others. Apparently she had been a rather troublesome young lady, and it might be surmised that she was still destined to give a good deal of trouble to those closely connected with her; but there was an easy candour about her disjointed reminiscences which seemed almost equivalent to innocence, and she was undeniably amusing. So much so, that Arthur was quite amazed when he consulted his watch and found that it was nearly six o'clock.

'Good gracious!' he exclaimed, 'I had no idea that it was so late. I must be off.'

'Tired of my company?' Lola inquired, turning her head slowly upon the cushion which supported it, so as to look at him.

'Of course not; but I am afraid you must be more than tired of mine.'

'Oh, I should have requested you to relieve me of it before now if I had wanted you to go; didn't we agree that there was to be no ceremony between cousins? What I was thinking that I would request you to do was to take me out for a walk. It isn't so hot now, and I should like a breath of fresh air. But you have some other engagement, perhaps?'

Well, it was not exactly an engagement; but it had come to be a pretty well understood thing that he should put in an appearance at evening service. The Colonel liked him to be there; his attendance was

supposed to act as an incentive to certain recalcitrant young men, who, if they did not go to church on Sunday evening, were apt to employ their leisure in attentions to the other sex which did not tend to edification, and his absence would, he knew, be remarked. But now something—a rebellious inclination to assert himself, it may be, or possibly a more laudable disinclination to refuse a lady's request—made him reflect that, after all, he was not Colonel Meynell's slave, and he answered :

‘No; I am quite at your orders. I generally go to church at half-past six; but I shall give myself a holiday this evening. Which way would you like to walk? It will be shady under the cliffs by this time.’

‘Decidedly, my dear Arthur,’ observed Miss Hamersley, as she rose with much deliberation, ‘you are a cousin of the right sort. I had my doubts of it a short time ago, but you have removed them. It is too amiable of you to dispense with a sermon for my sake, and I am too selfish to decline the sacrifice. I will go and put on my hat; we can decide where to walk when we are out of the house.’

## CHAPTER XII.

### A CRISIS.

ARTHUR had had but little experience of feminine perversity, or he would hardly have made that

the cliffs. On the other hand, it is likely enough that Lola would have marched him up to the church-door even if he had not betrayed his unwillingness to walk in that direction; for the opportunity was really too tempting a one to be neglected. She was too indolent to be malicious, too supremely self-confident to be jealous, perhaps also too indifferent to the ultimate fate of this good-looking boyish cousin of hers to care as much as she professed to do whether he ended by falling a victim to Miss Meynell or not. But she liked to be amused, and her impression was that it would be a good deal more amusing to parade Arthur under the eyes of his church-going friends than to sit beside him upon a hard rock and watch the advancing or retreating tide. His friends, she felt sure, would be more or less shocked, and he, unless she was very much mistaken in him, would look comically sheepish under their scrutiny.

Both of these amiable anticipations were fulfilled when she had carried her point—as, of course, she was bound to do—and had led the reluctant Arthur as far as the entrance of the churchyard just in time to meet Colonel and Miss Meynell, and Lord Branton, who were carrying Prayer-books in their hands. Fortune, indeed, was more kind to her than she had dared to expect, inasmuch as Lord Branton (whose usual dinner-hour was eight o'clock, and who had guests to entertain) was of the party. To see Lord Branton redden, start, and peer anxiously through

his spectacles first at her, and then at her companion, was almost better fun than to note the regretful surprise of the priggish young woman, the puzzled, interrogative glance which Colonel Meynell shot from beneath swiftly-lowered eyebrows at his disciple, and Arthur's own half downcast, half-defiant mien.

Her enjoyment of the situation which she had contrived was, however, naturally brief, and the persons concerned therein behaved themselves with the conventional propriety which was inevitable. Nobody asked Arthur whether he was coming to church, it being perfectly clear that that was not his intention; nobody asked, though doubtless everybody wondered, why he had selected so ostentatious a method of making it known that he preferred to take a walk with his cousin; and Lord Branton only smiled as pleasantly as he could when the mistress of his fate essayed to provoke him by exclaiming:

'How unflattering you are! You find time to asphyxiate yourself for an hour and a half in a stuffy church, but you are too busy to call upon a humble friend who, as you knew, was left all alone for a whole Sunday afternoon.'

'You don't seem so very much alone,' was his lordship's rejoinder. 'Besides, we expected you to come up to us with your father. When he arrived without you, I concluded that you didn't want to be bothered with us.'

Miss Meynell had only paused for a moment on her way to take her place at the harmonium; her brother



had followed her ; and, as the bell now ceased ringing, Lord Branton was fain to take off his hat and do likewise. He carried with him the disturbing echo of a slight laugh, and of an imperfectly caught remark about a compulsory change of partners.

‘ Why did you say that ? ’ Arthur asked, in vexed accents, as he turned away.

Lola finished a deliberate yawn before she inquired :

‘ What did I say ? ’

‘ You know very well what you said ; and it wasn’t—excuse me—in the best of taste. Perhaps you may be Lord Branton’s acknowledged partner—that’s your affair, and his—but I’m not supposed to be Miss Meynell’s, and I don’t think she would have liked it if she had heard you call me so.’

‘ Oh, you admirable young man ! Why were you not born in the early part of the century, to figure as the hero of some prim lady novelist ? Alas ! they are all dead and gone—the prim lady novelists, their ringleted readers, the Pauls and the Virginias. Even Miss Meynell can hardly be counted as a survivor. Depend upon it, when she goes her parochial rounds, she hears things called by their names, and is not shocked. How many of her young shop-women are unprovided with partners, do you suppose ? It would be the lack of one, not the possession of him, that would make them blush.’

‘ Miss Meynell isn’t a shop-woman,’ returned Arthur crossly. ‘ Besides, of course, that wasn’t what I meant.’

‘No? Well, never mind! we won’t begin quarrelling again, and it shall be admitted, if you like, that my taste is execrable. All the same, since Miss Meynell can’t hear us, I will confess to you, in strict confidence, that she is very welcome to my partner, and that I am glad to have secured hers, for once.’

They wandered away from the churchyard, and presently turning into one of the shady lanes above the town, seated themselves, at Lola’s suggestion, upon a sloping bank, overgrown with wild-flowers and hart’s-tongue ferns. The young man’s ill-humour was not of long duration. After all, Rhoda must have guessed that it was not he who had devised that somewhat awkward encounter on the threshold of the church, even if she did not also guess that he was not only walking with his cousin by or for his own pleasure. Meanwhile, it really was pleasant to lie at Lola’s feet and admire—as who could help admiring?—her grace and loveliness. There was just a suspicion of peril about it, too. He was aware of that, and the consciousness lent zest to a pleasure which might otherwise have become monotonous; for she seemed to have exhausted her conversational powers now. She reclined on her elbow, gazing sleepily down upon him, letting a remark fall from time to time and leaving the majority of his unanswered. Afterwards, when it became necessary that he should make certain excuses for himself, he ascribed to her a mesmeric power, and dated the exercise of it, so far as he was concerned, from that evening; but for the moment

he went no farther than to thank Heaven, as he had done once before, that his heart was no longer his own to be played tricks with.

It was not until the best part of an hour had thus insensibly slipped away that the surrounding stillness was broken by a sound which of late years has become somewhat disagreeably familiar to the ears of most of us—the sharp ting-ting of a cyclist's bell; and immediately afterwards two red-faced youths swept round the corner, with their legs stretched out before them, having diverged from the highroad, to which one of them would have done far more wisely to have kept, for, catching sight of a remarkably pretty girl seated on the bank at his elbow, what must this misguided young man do but address a jocularly impertinent phrase to her as he passed, accompanying his salutation with a kiss of his hand and a dexterously flung bunch of wild-flowers, which alighted on her knees. The effect was prompt and startling. In an instant Lola was standing erect, her cheeks white and her eyes blazing with anger. Her gesture, as she pointed after the retreating offender, was worthy of an insulted queen.

‘Catch that man and thrash him within an inch of his life!’ she cried.

Well, a pedestrian might be asked to perform an easier task than that of catching a man on a bicycle who is going downhill; but Arthur, who was himself justly incensed, and who could run like a hare, waited for no second bidding. He was soon abreast of the

culprit, and brought him to a standstill by calling out :

‘Put up, or I’ll knock that machine of yours from under you!’

The young fellow did as he was told. He was a podgy, round-faced hobbledehoy—not a native of Bridstow, as Arthur saw at a glance—and as for thrashing him, there would evidently be no difficulty about that, should such an extreme measure be found necessary. But it seemed probable that a breach of the peace might be averted, for, after a few words had been exchanged, he showed himself contrite in a sullen, uncouth fashion, and there was no reason to doubt the sincerity of his statement, that he had meant no harm and ‘didn’t think that the lady would have took offence at a bit o’ chaff.’

‘That’s all very well,’ said Arthur, ‘but you fellows can’t be allowed to make a public nuisance of yourselves and insult ladies in this way. You must come back with me and make a proper apology.’

For a moment the lad looked half inclined to demur; but, receiving no support from his comrade, who obviously wished to keep out of a row, he made a sulky sign of assent, and was duly led up to Miss Hamersley, who did not deign to take the slightest notice of his clumsy expressions of regret.

‘I told you,’ said she to Arthur, when these were at an end, ‘to thrash that man.’

‘But he has begged your pardon and said he is sorry,’ Arthur remonstrated; ‘I can’t very well

punish him after that. I think we must let him go now.'

Lola, with the light of passion still unquenched in her eyes, was about to speak again; but she was anticipated by the dismounted cyclist, who promptly pulled off his coat and rolled up his sleeves.

'Oh, if that's your game, come on!' cried he valiantly. 'I ain't afraid o' no bloomin' swells! Come on, unless you're afraid yourself.'

'Nonsense!' returned Arthur good-humouredly enough; 'put on your coat again and don't be silly. It's very evident to me that you have never been taught how to use your fists.'

He was so confident of his own superiority in that respect to his would-be antagonist that he was not roused to make immediate reprisals by a furious, ill-directed blow, which he had no difficulty in avoiding; but he could not hold out against Lola's scornful ejaculation:

'Had you not better apologize to this terrible person before he hurts you?'

An instant later the terrible person lay prostrate in the dust, all the valour knocked out of him, alas! and only so much wrath left as sufficed to produce an undignified splutter of: 'I'll summons you for this, see if I don't!'

'Oh, very well!' returned Arthur impatiently. 'Here is my card. Summons me, or do anything else you like; only for goodness' sake take yourself off now!'



He was disgusted and rather ashamed of himself—not a little displeased, also, with Lola, towards whom his back was turned, and to whom he did not choose to speak, while his vanquished adversary rose slowly and retreated, muttering, from the field of combat. But presently there came a light touch upon his shoulder, and, facing about, he found himself confronted with a lady who no longer resembled an irate goddess. The thunder-clouds had rolled away from Lola's brow, a light was shining in her eyes such as he had never beheld there before, her lips were curved into a strange smile, of which the meaning seemed to flash into his brain like a bewildering revelation.

‘How strong you are!’ she exclaimed admiringly, and then, all of a sudden: ‘You are adorable—I adore strength!’

Was he right or wrong in the interpretation which he placed upon her words and looks? That is a question which he was destined to ask himself many times, and to which even now he would hesitate to return a positive reply, one way or the other. What he has never been able, and never will be able, to explain is the immediate result produced upon him by both. Not, to be sure, that he would be the first man who had lost his head under similar circumstances, nor that to kiss a woman's hand after losing your head can be accounted an unparalleled experience. But Arthur's contention (the solace of which may be conceded to him by a stretch of charity) is that all his

proceedings on that memorable Sunday evening, from the moment when his cousin touched him on the shoulder, were purely involuntary. He denies that he lost sight for a minute of the absurdity, the vulgarity, the total inadequacy of the scene which had just been brought to a close by the departure of the fallen counter-jumper; he will not allow that Lola's congratulations upon his facile victory affected him otherwise than with a feeling of ashamed irritation; nay, he asserts that, notwithstanding the astounding discovery which he believed himself to have made, he did not even think that he loved Lola when he raised her fingers to his lips. However, he did kiss her fingers; and the only wonder seems to be that he stopped there.

Probably he stopped there because it was not her wish that he should proceed farther. She had, it may be assumed, obtained as much as she wanted for one afternoon, and although it was a part of her nature to let herself be swayed by occasional gusts of impulse, she seldom, if ever, parted with all control over the course of events. When she dismissed her cousin on the outskirts of the town, declaring that she preferred to walk the rest of the way home alone, she had said nothing more to strengthen his faith in the discovery above referred to.

But if the episode which has just been described was not of a nature to cause much anxiety to Miss Lola (who was scarcely in her novitiate respecting such episodes), it was quite otherwise with Arthur

Foley. For three days in succession he hid himself sedulously from his friends, dreading he knew not what, slinking down to the quay in the early morning, and spending long hours in fishing for mackerel, accompanied by old Jacob Luscombe, while he inwardly cursed his weakness and infidelity with a vehemence which was perhaps superfluous. At the expiration of that period, during which Lola had made no sign, nor had any summons been served upon him at the instance of the assaulted bicyclist, he began to hope that it really was superfluous. After all, he might have made a mistake. Lola, by her own confession, was an accomplished flirt; she was, doubtless, able at will to throw all sorts of expressions into those wonderful eyes of hers, and nothing was more likely than that she desired to subjugate him for the mere fun and triumph of doing so. Nevertheless, it remained true that she had shown herself far too dangerous to be trifled with, that she had chosen to exercise her powers once, and that she might choose to exercise them again—with more serious consequences, possibly.

‘And I’m such a miserable idiot!’ sighed Arthur. ‘Heaven only knows what I mightn’t say or do, if she were to play the same game with me a second time! It’s a horrible situation to be placed in. And to think that Rhoda could save me with three words!’

It was on the evening of the third day that this inward ejaculation escaped him. He was wending his way dejectedly towards home, and just as he

turned to cross a bridge which spans the stream in the upper part of the town, who should emerge from one of the narrow streets, as if in response to his unspoken prayer, but Rhoda herself! Now, there was nothing very extraordinary in that; but Arthur was thrown into such a state of agitation by the sight of her that he could make no coherent reply to her cheerful greeting.

‘Where have you been all this long time?’ she asked. ‘I began to think you must be ill, and I should have sent to St. Ann’s to inquire, if I had had anybody to send.’ Then, noticing that he was evidently not himself, she added, with more anxiety in her tone, ‘We haven’t done anything to offend you, have we? I hope you will be friendly enough to tell me if we have.’

‘Oh no—not you!’ answered Arthur hurriedly. ‘I saw your brother on Sunday, you know, and—but, of course, he hasn’t said anything to you, and if he hasn’t, I suppose I mustn’t.’

Rhoda looked perplexed. ‘Do you mean about your not coming to church in the evening?’ she asked. ‘But I am sure you are quite mistaken if you think that Victor was in the least annoyed about that. In the first place, he doesn’t pretend to give any orders to you upon the subject; besides which, he understood perfectly well how it happened, and he was laughing about it afterwards. Miss Hamersley isn’t to be denied, is she?’

‘No,’ said Arthur rather grimly, ‘Miss Hamersley

isn't to be denied. But it was in the morning that I saw your brother; I scarcely spoke to him when we met outside the church.'

After that, a full confession was, of course, unavoidable. Arthur had no deliberate intention of rendering it so, although it may be doubted whether he could have held his tongue even if he had admitted what he subsequently declined to admit, that he was stealing a march upon Colonel Meynell by avowing his love there and then. The whole story came out. He said he had no hope—or, at all events, scarcely any—but he felt that he had been asked to accept a position which it would be impossible for him to maintain; he preferred to know the worst at once and have done with it. Some hint he gave of a terrible, mysterious fate which might be in store for him, should he be rejected; but he did not dwell long on that, and he concluded an appeal which made up in earnestness for what it may have lacked in eloquence by begging to be put out of his pain forthwith.

They had reached the shelter of the woods, where they were in no danger of being beheld by spectators less discreet than squirrels or birds, when he ceased speaking and halted to receive Rhoda's reply. This did not come speedily. She walked slowly on, without looking at him, so that he was constrained to resume his march, and he felt it to be a good omen that she should be so little perturbed. Yet, when at length she opened her lips, it was only to say:

'I must tell Victor.'



‘Oh, of course!’ he answered eagerly. ‘I wouldn’t for the world have any secrecy about it, and I don’t at all expect your brother to give his sanction immediately. I quite see that he is right—in a way. I ought to have an income of my own, or a profession——’

‘Yes, I suppose any father or guardian would say that.’

‘But I’m not asking him to make unreasonable concessions; I’m willing to wait if—if you are. Oh, Rhoda, nothing depends upon him—everything depends upon you! You know it is so, don’t you?’

He caught her by both hands, and gazed imploringly into her eyes, which were raised to meet his without flinching.

‘Yes,’ she said, smiling a little. ‘I think it is true that all really depends upon me; but I can’t give you an answer until I have seen Victor.’

‘Your brother boasted that you took your cue from him in all things,’ Arthur observed, his countenance falling slightly.

‘I think that was true, too; it wasn’t boasting.’

‘But, Rhoda—surely you can tell me at least whether you love me or not?’

‘No; not now. You have been very sudden, and you must not press me. To-morrow, at eleven o’clock, if you will come up to the cottage, I will answer you; but now I want you to go away, please, and say nothing more.’

She was so quiet, so self-possessed and authoritative,

that he released her, wondering a little at his own forbearance. But, as he watched her slim, retreating figure, flitting upwards through the wood, his heart beat high with hope. Whatever else might be doubtful, it was certain that she had not refused him, and if she feared to disobey her brother, what of that? Had not she herself owned that everything in reality depended upon her?

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### CAUSA FINITA EST.

‘OH, if it comes to that, I understand!’ said Colonel Meynell, who, with a troubled countenance, was pacing hither and thither in his tiny drawing-room. ‘Or rather, I don’t understand; because these are matters belonging to feminine nature, which must always remain incomprehensible to us. But I understand that such things can be, and are. To love a man without even suspecting that you love him until he speaks! Well, it seems strange; but I don’t say that it is really strange, and of course I don’t blame you. And as for your having told me nothing about it last night, I don’t blame you for that, either. It was best to make sure of your own feelings first.’

‘Then I am satisfied,’ Rhoda declared, drawing a long breath of relief.

‘Ah, my dear!’ said her brother, pausing before the cushioned window-seat upon which she had taken

up her position, and looking down upon her with mingled vexation, doubt and compassion, 'do you think it is possible for you to mean what you say? You tell me to decide for you; but do you think you can be satisfied with my decision? You may submit to it, perhaps.'

'I meant that I was satisfied because you don't blame me,' the girl answered; 'but, of course, I never dreamt of not submitting to your decision. You always know best, Victor, and you always do what is right. If you say that it can't be, I shall know that it can't be, and I promise you that I won't complain.'

This is the pleasant sort of quandary in which a man of clear mind, strong will, and immense personal influence over his weaker fellow-mortals is liable to be landed at any moment by the simple operation of natural laws. The Colonel could control and direct many things and many persons; yet in the presence of so common, so universal, an experience as that of falling in love he was powerless. His sister, by no fault of her own, had slipped through his fingers; yet in emancipating herself she had not released him from responsibility, nor, indeed, could he have accepted such a release if she had offered it to him. What, then, was to be done? Nothing, it appeared, beyond what the average father or guardian would do, and be justified in doing. 'I am sorry to be disagreeable,' says the average parent or guardian, 'but I really cannot consent. You are

both of you far too young; one of you has neither means nor a career, nor any definite notion of shaping one out for himself; the other has yielded to a fancy which, in all probability, she will get over before the year is out, if only she is left alone. Immediate marriage is out of the question, and a long engagement is always a one-sided bargain, to which I should not be doing my duty if I were to agree. I can see nothing for it but to pronounce an absolute veto. Both of you may live to thank me, and, in the meantime you ought to blame your own precipitation rather than me.'

It would be easy and quite excusable to use such language; but would it be quite right? Victor Meynell, being a conscientious man, was embarrassed by his inability to disguise from himself that the stock objections did not wholly fit the particular case. He knew that he was influenced more by his distrust of Arthur Foley as an individual—a distrust in support of which he could adduce no argument or evidence—than by a prudent aversion to the uncertainty of the latter's prospects. He knew also that Rhoda would do just exactly what he told her to do, and he was sure that he could make a much wiser choice for her than she had made for herself. Yet she was entitled to choose. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, people who fall in love fall out of love again and are none the worse; still, there is the hundredth case. The occasional occurrence of the possible hundredth case seems to have been proved, and has

to be reckoned with. His perplexed inward debate found issue at length in an ejaculation of: 'What a thousand pities it is that you couldn't have taken Braunton!'

'But he never asked me,' Rhoda remarked pertinently.

'Oh, I know! And there is this stupid infatuation about Hamersley's daughter—an infatuation which, unless I am very much mistaken in Braunton, will vanish some fine day, leaving him a penitent and astonished man. But supposing that he had asked you?'

'I dare say I should have accepted him,' the girl answered with perfect frankness. 'I like him extremely, and if I had thought that you wished it, I might have thought that I wished it, too. But that is all over now. There is only one man in the world whom I can ever marry, and I would have refused him yesterday if it had been possible for me to refuse him; because I knew from what he told me that there was scarcely any hope of my being allowed to accept him.'

The Colonel broke into a laugh which had not much sound of mirth. 'Well,' he said, 'I suppose Foley will be here presently. I had better walk down and meet him; you shall see him afterwards. I am in a puzzling dilemma, but it is partly of your own creating, and I can but do my duty according to my lights. You might have defied me, and, perhaps, ended by getting what you wish for; but you won't



do that. And so—there it is! I must act as I believe it to be best for you that I should act.'

The Colonel left the room and the house without further words, well knowing that there was no need for any. It was never his way to be demonstrative, nor did his sister require to be told that he would rather have undergone any amount of suffering himself than inflict the slightest unnecessary pain upon her. But if there had been some suggestion of weakness and indecision in the language which he had held to her, nothing of the sort was traceable in his manner of accosting the young man whom he encountered, five minutes later, by the bank of the stream.

'Foley,' he said, after briefly returning the other's greeting, 'I consider that you have broken faith with me. I told you that I trusted you not to abuse your opportunities of speaking to my sister as you have done.'

Arthur's colour rose, but he had half anticipated some such charge, and he had promised himself that he would keep his temper.

'I can't admit that I have broken faith with anybody,' he answered. 'I remember your saying that you trusted me not to distress or annoy her; but I made no promise. Even if I had, it doesn't seem to me that I should have broken it by telling her that I loved her. I was bound to tell her—I couldn't have helped it!'

'My good fellow, every man can help doing what

he has no business to do, and no man in your present position has any business to tell a girl that he loves her. However, we'll let that pass; the mischief is done. Distress you most undoubtedly have brought upon her, and my opinion is that she might have been spared it, if you had exercised the self-control that I asked of you. For, of course, what has happened hasn't caused me to change my mind. I told you that it wouldn't do, and I can only repeat that it won't do. I dare say I should be more sorry for you if I were less sorry for her; as it is, I can't help feeling that you won't be the chief sufferer.'

'Then she does love me!' cried Arthur; for, naturally enough, that joyful implication was the one feature in the Colonel's stern harangue which impressed him.

The Colonel frowned, and bit his lip. 'You will see her presently,' he answered, 'and she will tell you what I suppose you will be glad to hear—though I am not sure that you ought to be glad. But she will also tell you that she cannot marry you, because, for the reasons I gave the other day, I can't allow an engagement.'

'Ah, but things are not as they were the other day! You said she would take her cue from you, meaning that she would not love me, because you—why, I can't tell—dislike me; but you were wrong there, you see. Isn't it possible that you may be wrong in disliking me, too?'

'I don't dislike you. I am not sure of you—that

is the long and short of it, I believe. In any case, I may tell you that Rhoda wishes my decision to be final, and my decision has to be against you. The less said the better. If I can make arrangements to send her away for a time, and give her a change of scene, I will ; but there may be difficulties, for we have lost sight of our friends in the outer world. I hope you yourself will not linger in these parts, and I can't think that you will have any wish to do so.'

Now, of course, Colonel Meynell was very well aware that, although his sister might be willing to make his decision final, it would not and could not be accepted as such by the man whom she loved. He therefore listened with polite patience to all that Arthur had to say upon the subject, and, when at length the latter paused for a reply, merely remarked:

'It isn't a case for argument between you and me, my dear fellow. If you will go in now and see Rhoda, she will probably make you understand in five minutes what the case really is. However, I won't restrict you to five minutes. I have some things to do which will occupy me for about half an hour, after which I will join you—supposing, that is, that you care to see me again before you leave.'

The Colonel had not anything particularly urgent to do, nor was his heart very much in the tasks with which he busied himself during the half-hour that ensued. He had expressed but little compassion for Arthur Foley ; yet, now that he came to reflect upon

the whole situation, he did begin to feel sorry for the poor young fellow, whose offence, after all, had been less heinous than provoking, and who was about to be punished for it after a fashion which would doubtless astonish him. Because it certainly is an astonishing and unusual proceeding on the part of any girl to make so complete a surrender of her personal will as Rhoda had made, and if such a surrender should arouse the wrath and incredulity of her lover, who could blame him? But the Colonel was absolutely sure of his sister. He had no misgivings; he knew that she would never consent to anything which he had felt it his duty to forbid, and on the expiration of the allotted time he entered the cottage, to find precisely what he had expected to find. Rhoda was pale, Arthur was flushed. Both of them looked distressed, while one exhibited unmistakable symptoms of the anger for which it had been decided that he should not be held deserving of censure.

‘Well, Foley,’ the Colonel said, not unkindly, ‘you see how it is. Of course you don’t like it, and of course you think me an opinionated brute; but that can’t be helped. The main thing is that there should be no misapprehension, and Rhoda will have convinced you——’

‘She has convinced me of nothing,’ interrupted Arthur, ‘except that you won’t allow an engagement, and that I knew before. I dare say you are perfectly right; I don’t complain. Only I wish I could convince you and her that, although she isn’t in the

least bound to me, I am as much bound to her as if an engagement existed. When all's said and done, there are limits to your power, you know. You can't prevent me from feeling as I do.'

'Oh no,' answered the Colonel, with a slight smile. 'I haven't that pretension.'

'And you can prevent me from remaining true to myself and—and to her. I'm not asking her to remain true to me; I shan't dream of reproaching her if she doesn't.'

The Colonel was about to make a sensible and appropriate rejoinder, when he was surprised, and somewhat disagreeably so, at being forestalled by his sister, who said quietly :

'But I think I shall. I can't promise more, because, if I did, that would be much the same thing as engaging myself to you, which I mustn't do. But I don't think I shall ever marry anyone else. You don't mind my telling him so, do you, Victor?' she asked, turning to her brother.

The keeper of her conscience could only shrug his shoulders and laugh. 'You have said what you have said, my dear girl,' he remarked; 'it's just a few seconds too late to ask me whether I mind or not, isn't it? You must try to accept that assurance for what it is worth, Foley; and candidly, I hope and think it isn't worth much. Anyhow, there must be no more assurances, nor even half-assurances. I might say something about remote future possibilities, but it is much better not. They are too remote and



too improbable. Let us write *Finis* to the present chapter, and have done with it.'

It was a curious testimony to the single-mindedness and simplicity of this brother and sister that they should have permitted themselves two such indiscreet utterances as those recorded above, and that, after the one had avowed her love for her suitor, while the other had spoken about future possibilities, they should have believed themselves capable of there and then writing *Finis* to an obviously unfinished chapter. But Colonel Meynell was accustomed to be obeyed, and Rhoda had the habit of obedience. It scarcely occurred to either of them that after the autocrat (having excellent reasons for so doing) had said, 'You must,' something like a dead-lock might be created by the not altogether inconceivable rejoinder of 'I won't.'

Arthur, however, did not make that defiant rejoinder. He went away at last, sorrowful, mortified, and a little disappointed, yet not outwardly rebellious; and it was reserved for his father to put forward representations on his behalf which could not easily be gainsaid. For, of course, Mr. Foley had to be told, and, equally of course, a subsequent conference had to be held between him and Colonel Meynell, whereat the elder man had all the best of the argument.

'My dear sir,' Mr. Foley wound up this discussion by saying, 'you appear to me to be the victim of some incomprehensible prejudice. Here are two young people who are mutually attached, who seem

to be admirably suited to one another, and whom nothing that I can see prevents from setting up house together to-morrow. I have explained to you that there will be no difficulty about money, and you confess that you have nothing to urge against my son, except his youth and his lack of a profession. But youth, so far from being an incurable disease, is, as we know, one which is quite certain to be cured by the lapse of a very few years ; and as for a profession, may I take the liberty of asking what your own is ? You, surely, should be the last man in the world to doubt the possibility of being busy and useful without labouring for hire, and although this property is not a large one, I think that when I have handed it over to Arthur—as I have told you that I mean to do at his marriage—it will supply him with work enough to keep him out of mischief. I grant you that the affair has been somewhat sudden, and that you may not know Arthur quite as well yet as you would like to know him before surrendering your sister's future happiness to his care. Let us wait awhile, then, and let us have no nominal engagements. But when you tell me peremptorily that there is to be an end of the whole matter, and when you suggest that I should turn my son out of house and home, lest embarrassing encounters should follow, I do feel entitled, notwithstanding my natural weakness, to remind you that you are not my master.'

The Colonel quite acknowledged that, but remained obdurate all the same. If he was not Mr. Foley's

master, he was his sister's master ; and if Arthur did not choose to leave the neighbourhood, why, Rhoda would have to do so for a time, that was all. He could not consent to an engagement, nominal or implied, and he was well aware that his refusal must appear to be inspired by prejudice.

‘ Naturally,’ he added, ‘ you think well of your son, and I don’t say that I think badly of him ; only that isn’t enough. He has had no opportunity as yet of showing what he is made of, and you seem disposed to deny him the customary opportunities. If we were to talk for another two hours, Mr. Foley, we shouldn’t understand one another a bit better than we do now.’

The Colonel put it in that way for courtesy’s sake ; but as a matter of fact he perfectly understood Mr. Foley’s standpoint, which, indeed, presented no difficulties to the average intelligence. Mr. Foley, on the other hand, did not in the least understand him, nor from that day to this has he ever wavered in his belief that Colonel Meynell’s piety was compatible with a shrewd eye to the main chance. Braunton Towers, to be sure, was a far more imposing and tempting prize to play for than St. Ann’s. Meanwhile, the upshot of it all was that the Colonel sustained a preliminary defeat. With some trouble, and after some negotiations which were a little galling to his pride, he did contrive to dismiss his sister on a fortnight’s visit to some friends at a distance ; but at the expiration of that time it was necessary for her to return home, and when she returned, Arthur Foley

had not yet quitted the place. The worst of having a small income and numerous local ties is that you can't go away for several months, as richer folks might do, and the worst of having to deal with a rejected lover whose conduct is unexceptionable is that you can't decently turn your back upon him.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### MISS HAMERSLEY ENJOYS HERSELF.

'I WOULDN'T trouble to give any more reasons if I were you,' said Lola Hamersley. 'You have told me already that you hate picnics, that you ought to stay at home to-morrow to write important letters, that nobody will miss you if you don't turn up, and I forget what else. I don't believe a single word of it; but if I did, that wouldn't prevent me from asking you, as a personal favour, to come with us. Now, are you going to persist in your refusal?'

She glanced down smilingly at her cousin, who was seated upon a footstool beside her sofa, and who answered with undisguised irritation:

'You know well enough that I can't refuse you when you ask in that way. All the same, I don't see why you should be so anxious to drag me to Lady Braunton's picnic against my will. It can't be my company that you want, for you will have Braunton, and you never condescend to notice my existence when he is anywhere near.'

‘I shall notice you to-morrow,’ returned Lola composedly. ‘Most likely I shall notice you a great deal, and so will other people, you may be sure. Perhaps that is why I want you to come, and perhaps that is why you would like to stay away if you could. But the beauty of it is that you can’t. Such is your cousinly affection for me that you are literally unable to deny me the fun of watching how you and Miss Rhoda behave yourselves under trying circumstances.’

She broke into a low laugh, while Arthur started to his feet with an impatient exclamation, and marched off to the window. Some weeks had elapsed since his dismissal by the girl whom he loved—weeks which were not wholly satisfactory to look back upon, and which had led up to no very satisfactory outlook. He ought, he knew, to have gone away. He had talked of going away, and still talked of doing so; yet he had lingered on, and his motives for lingering were of a nature which he did not care to analyze too closely. It was true that his father had spoken plaintively about the horrors of solitude at St. Ann’s; but although filial obligations might serve well enough for a pretext, he could hardly plead to himself that he had been swayed by any overwhelming sense of these, nor could he even pretend that he was reluctant to quit the neighbourhood in which Rhoda dwelt. Since her return he had met her once or twice, and had exchanged a few words with her in the presence of a third person; but, of course, he had not revisited Moor Cottage. What she evidently expected him to



do, and what he had been pretty plainly told to do, was to go away and win his spurs. His persistence in remaining at home could not but cause her embarrassment, and was not likely to increase her love or her respect for him. Nevertheless, he stayed on day after day. Day after day, too, he found himself drawn by an irresistible attraction, which had a strong element of repulsion in it, to that lodging-house drawing-room by the sea, where his cousin Lola lay upon her sofa and laughed at him. What in the world did he go thither to seek? Assuredly not sympathy, for Lola had guessed, or had been told, how he was situated, and was not sparing in derisive comments upon his woeful plight. They seldom met without quarrelling, only they never parted without having made friends again—and Lola had a fashion of making friends which was disturbing, alarming even, and which could not be remembered afterwards without horrible misgivings as to what might possibly come of it some fine day or other.

At the risk of representing Arthur Foley as not only weak but unpardonably fatuous, his biographer has to confess that there were moments when he felt almost sure that his beautiful cousin had lost her heart to him. Not that she intended to marry him—that was quite another affair, and her intention of ultimately marrying Lord Braunton was as obvious to him as it was, for some reason or other, distasteful—but there were moments when her words and her looks seemed to admit of only one interpretation. Also there were

moments when Arthur did not feel as sure as he would have liked to feel of himself. Why, for example, could he not refuse to go to this picnic of Lady Branton's, at which the Meynells were to be present, and from which ordinary good taste required that he should absent himself? After a long pause he said :

‘I sincerely hope you will get some fun out of this horrid *al-fresco* entertainment, but I'm afraid you won't get much fun out of me, and I don't know what you mean by “trying circumstances.” No, I don't want to know, thanks. You needn't explain. We have been over that ground so many times already, haven't we?’

‘Don't you like going over that ground? I thought you did. Well, you shan't be teased any more, and you shall go over as much ground with Miss Meynell on Thursday next as you can persuade her to go over with you. Rather than rob you of such a grand opportunity, I will get up a flirtation with the terrible Colonel, and leave Lord Branton to his own devices. See what it is to have a truly affectionate and disinterested cousin to back you up.’

She was more affectionate than disinterested; several persons, including Lord Branton, had suspected that of late, and had been disquieted by their suspicions. Yet she always contrived to get her own way and carry her point. She had contrived cleverly enough to prevent Lord Branton from making her a definite offer of marriage as yet. She contrived to get rid of her father whenever she wished to get rid of

him, and now she had contrived to secure Arthur's acceptance of an invitation which even Mr. Foley had suggested that it might be as well to decline.

Mr. Foley, however, had no serious objection to accompanying his son on the following Thursday, when the dogcart which he had recently purchased was brought round to the door, and when Arthur took the reins. Mr. Foley thought he could form a tolerably shrewd forecast of coming events, and was of opinion that so soon as Lord Braunton's engagement to Miss Hamersley should be announced, Colonel Meynell would become more amenable to the demands of two sighing lovers. In the meantime, such an encounter as was about to take place might be awkward, no doubt; but the Colonel had nobody but himself to blame for inevitable awkwardnesses. One couldn't be expected to shun the society of one's neighbours in order to suit Colonel Meynell's convenience. And while he was being driven at a rapid pace through the deep lanes on this still, hazy August day, which was like an anticipation of the coming autumn, he took occasion to remark:

'Lord Braunton's affair with Lola seems to drag rather. Why doesn't he come to the point and have done with it?'

'I suppose she won't let him,' Arthur answered. 'Perhaps she hasn't quite made up her mind yet whether she means to take him or not.'

'Oh! she has made up her mind. Otherwise, saving your presence, she wouldn't have played you

off against him as she has been doing for the last week or two. Robert is growing anxious, too; and unless I am very much mistaken in Robert, his daughter will have to obey his orders or he will know the reason why. Not that the question interests me, except in so far as it concerns you. I think it would be a good thing for you to get the course cleared by the removal of that couple from your path.'

Arthur made no response. He was not in sympathy with his father, and did not care to inquire into the latter's meaning. His own feeling certainly was that he would be able to breathe more freely after Lola should have accepted Lord Braunton; but he could not possibly have told anybody else why he half desired, half dreaded that event, nor did he believe that Rhoda's obduracy would be in the slightest degree affected by its occurrence. At the bottom of his heart he could neither understand nor quite forgive the girl who had confessed that she loved him, but who was nevertheless willing to break off all communication with him. She might, he thought, have divined—surely, if she had really loved him, she would have divined—that he was exposed by her desertion of him to temptations which any man with blood in his veins must find it hard to resist.

This vexed sensation of having been defrauded of what he had a right to expect at her hands was destined to be rendered more acute by the subsequent episodes and incidents of the day. Brake Tor, the spot which Lady Braunton had decided upon as the

scene of her picnic, is one of those rocky elevations by which the surface of the unending stretch of moorland above Bridstow is diversified, and from the summit of which all manner of distant places are said to be discernible in clear weather. But as, in the West Country, fine weather almost always implies hazy distances, while bad weather is but another name for dense fog, the visitor to Brake Tor who expects to be rewarded for his climb by detecting the outline of Portland Bill upon the horizon is not unlikely to be disappointed. For the rest, the numerous company which had assembled in compliance with Lady Braunton's invitation was a good deal more interested in aspics and mayonnaises than in Portland Bill. Arthur and his father were the last to arrive, and their advent caused no stir among such acquaintances of theirs as were already seated upon the heather and busily engaged in refreshing themselves. The Meynells were there, and the Latimers, and one or two other neighbours; but the party was chiefly composed of guests at Braunton Towers, to whom Arthur had not been introduced, and to whom it was apparently not deemed necessary to introduce him now. Colonel Meynell looked up, smiled and nodded. Rhoda did the same. Room was made for Mr. Foley beside Lady Braunton, and Lola called out to her cousin:

'Come and sit down here, Arthur; I have kept a place for you.'

All this was quite as it should have been, and



Arthur ought to have been very thankful that his appearance had thus been accepted as a matter of course; yet he was vaguely dissatisfied, and as he squatted uncomfortably upon the heather at Lola's elbow, disposing of his long legs as best he could, he was unable to refrain from whispering to her:

'This is extremely thoughtful of you; but—am I not occupying our host's place?'

'Our host,' she replied, in an equally subdued voice, 'has chosen to occupy yours. There is no accounting for tastes, is there? I have often had occasion to make that reflection both about him and about you. Well, we must try to console ourselves and one another. After all, your opportunity doesn't fall due quite yet. When we are all sufficiently gorged, we shall break up into fresh groups, no doubt.'

Lord Branton, sure enough, had taken up his position beside Rhoda Meynell, and was evidently exerting himself for her entertainment. Arthur, knowing what he knew, felt that it was absurd to be jealous; still, he did not altogether like it, and the cheerful composure with which Rhoda listened to and responded to her neighbour's conversation displeased him. He, for his part, was neither cheerful nor composed, and his own neighbour, after one or two attempts to improve his humour, abandoned him in favour of a young Guardsman who was staying at Branton Towers, and whom a few glances from her dark eyes had sufficed to vanquish. How was Arthur

to know that there had been a little tiff that morning between his neighbour and Lord Branton, and that the latter—poor innocent soul!—was striving to avenge himself by methods which no male creature has ever yet discovered the secret of employing successfully?

So if the spectacle of an obviously insincere flirtation between Lord Branton and the lady whom, if he had had any common-sense, he would have been courting sincerely, did not for a moment deceive the person for whose benefit it had been arranged, it so far misled Arthur Foley as to cause him to depart from a certain wise and proper resolution that he had made. He was well aware that it did not beseem him to approach Rhoda Meynell; yet, no sooner had luncheon been disposed of, and a general movement begun to take place, than he did approach her. She was still talking to Lord Branton, and he interrupted them almost rudely.

‘Don’t you want to come and look at the view, Miss Meynell?’ he asked. ‘That’s what we’re all here for, isn’t it?’

She coloured, and looked rather taken aback for the moment, but quickly recovered her presence of mind.

‘I don’t think I will climb up to the top of Brake Tor to-day,’ she replied. ‘I have often seen the view before, and Lord Branton was saying that perhaps he would walk across the moor with me to a farm where the people, who are friends of mine, are in great trouble, owing to their having had two ricks

burnt down to the ground. But don't let me take you away if you think you ought to stay and look after your guests,' she added, turning to the disconsolate landowner, who, indeed, looked as if he would prefer sending his tenants a cheque to visiting them personally.

But Lord Braunton, after a quick, furtive glance at Lola and her captive Guardsman, professed himself ready to start.

'I'm not at all wanted here, and I'm quite at your orders, Miss Meynell,' he declared. 'I suppose it will take us a good hour to walk there and back, won't it? If so, we had better lose no more time.'

Arthur whisked round without another word.

'She doesn't care!' he said to himself angrily; 'she has no will of her own, nor any particular wish, that I can see, except to do as her brother tells her. If he told her to marry that fellow she would marry him to-morrow, gig-lamps and all, and be quite contented. As for me, I dare say she would be sorry to see me go to the deuce, but she would never think that it was she who had sent me there.'

Ridiculously unjust as such reflections were, similar ones have been indulged in and repented of by many a disappointed lover before now, and Arthur did not really mean what he thought for a moment. But it was unlucky that this foolish mood of his should have led him to walk straight into a trap which had been carefully laid for him. Five minutes later he was walking along one of the narrow glens which slope

precipitously downwards from the outskirts of the moor, his companion being Lola Hamersley, who had shaken off her Guardsman on his approach and who was now offering him consolation after her fashion.

'Cheer up!' she was saying; 'plenty of misfortunes are blessings in disguise, and if one lives long enough, one finds out what they really are. Meanwhile, it would be polite of you to look a little less disgusted with your present company. Take example by me. I am quite gay and sprightly, you see, though I have been just as much deserted as you have.'

'You are pleased to say so; but the truth, of course, is that if you had wanted Branton to be here now, here he would have been—and I shouldn't.'

'And you complain of that! Evidently you don't wish to spoil me by an over-dose of flattery.'

'I'm not complaining; only you mustn't talk as if there were any sort of resemblance between your case and mine. To begin with, you don't care a straw for Branton.'

'How many straws do you imagine that you care for Miss Meynell? Shall I tell you what is making you so cross, Arthur? It is that your vanity has been wounded. Your vanity, not your heart; for, whatever you may say or think, you will never persuade me that your heart really belongs to that cold, prim girl, who is inevitably destined to become the wife of some country clergyman or other. You are capable of a very different sort of love from any that

she can inspire—or would know what to do with when she had got it.’

That might be true ; and Lola, after she had seated herself upon the trunk of a fallen tree, and had made him sit down beside her, went on to say other things which might also be true, but which were a trifle audacious. Perhaps she understood him ; unquestionably she understood one side of him, and such use did she make of her knowledge, that at the end of half an hour he had lost his head, if he had not lost his heart. It was the old story of that Sunday afternoon over again, only this time he was in a far worse case, because he was more reckless of consequences. Lola had convinced him, not only that he might win her if he chose, not only that his chance of ever winning Rhoda was a very remote one, but that Rhoda did not, in truth, want to be won. And if the girl whom he loved was willing to live without him, willing even to marry some other man (as he believed that she was), what did anything else signify ? After all, one isn’t a stock or a stone ; one can’t pretend to be altogether unmoved by an avowal of love—for Arthur, not inexcusably, took certain expressions which Lola had used as an avowal of love—from the most beautiful woman one has ever beheld in one’s life.

Well, it was not her hand that he kissed on this occasion, and she scarcely resisted his embrace ; but the moment afterwards she pushed him away, laughing, and exclaiming :



'*Honi soit qui mal y pense!* Between cousins much is permitted, only we live in a strait-laced country; and if good Mrs. Latimer were to come round the corner suddenly, I am afraid she might jump to unwarrantable conclusions. *Allons!* If I have comforted you a little, I am satisfied. Suppose we go back now and join the festive gathering?'

She really seemed to think that things could end like that; and, what was more, she insisted upon making them end like that for the time being. She turned a deaf ear to his entreaties, his queries, his asseverations. She would do nothing but laugh at him in her languid, rather unmirthful way, and very soon she had brought him within sight of the rest of the party, after which it was necessary for him to behave as though he had not just taken an irrevocable and perhaps fatal step.

By the rest of the party (which did not include Lord Braunton and Rhoda, who had not yet returned from their walk) these truants were received with subdued and significant smiles. Lady Braunton, upon whom the light of a relinquished hope was beginning to shine once more, took joyful note of the young man's confused aspect; Mrs. Latimer could not resist nudging her husband, who immediately asked her in a loud voice what was the matter now; and Colonel Meynell's keen eyes rested for a moment upon the couple, with an expression which may not have been one of scorn, but which Arthur at once interpreted as such. As for Mr. Foley, he was more

diverted than alarmed, and it was only when he found himself reduced to beg somebody for a lift home, his son having unceremoniously driven off without him, that he began to wonder what the deuce that girl had been up to.

## CHAPTER XV.

### RELEASE.

ARTHUR'S first impression when he woke on the following morning was that something terrible had happened to him. Then he remembered what had happened; and then, in self-defence, he had to make up his mind that it was not terrible at all. Under other circumstances, of course, it would have been terrible enough, but under other circumstances it could not have come to pass. If Rhoda had been true to him, if she had really cared for him as she had professed to do, it was not the fascinations of Lola Hamersley that would ever have caused him to falter in his allegiance; but since Rhoda had dismissed all thought of him from her mind, without difficulty or even temporary loss of spirits, the very best thing that he could do was to imitate her. And Lola's powers of fascination were undeniable when she chose to exert them. To be sure, he was not in love with her in quite the same way as he was, or had been, in love with Rhoda Meynell; but perhaps there were more ways than one of being in love, and probably he would not be unhappy with Lola as his wife.

With these and other more or less irrelevant reflections he endeavoured to maintain his self-esteem while he was dressing; but he could not get away from the fact that he had bound himself by a distinct promise, nor could he feel that he would be free to make a formal offer to his cousin until he should have been released from that promise. A few words, no doubt, would obtain his release for him; but the uttering of those few words would be such a horribly unpleasant process, that he longed to get it over with as little delay as might be. Could he go boldly up to Moor Cottage, as soon as he had had his breakfast, and ask to see Rhoda? He hardly thought that he could. He did not wish to spare himself—or, at least, he believed that he did not—but he shrank from making the brutally straightforward confession which such a course would render necessary; and if he could be assured of his liberty without having been called upon to mention Lola Hamersley's name, that would surely be all the better for everybody concerned. That Rhoda would hesitate for a moment to restore him his liberty he would not allow himself to doubt. He would have been a far more miserable man than he was (which is saying a good deal) if he had not harboured a strong feeling of resentment against the girl who had talked of loving him, but who was evidently indifferent as to what might become of him and his love.

Finally he decided to wait until after luncheon, and then walk slowly in the direction of Moor Cottage.

By that means he would be almost sure of encountering Rhoda, who went down to Bridstow on most afternoons of the week, and there would be no need to tell her that he had waylaid her purposely. What he had not anticipated, and what upset his equanimity a little, was that the first person he encountered on the woodland path, which he had so frequently mounted with a lighter heart than now beat beneath his waistcoat, was not Rhoda, but her brother. The Colonel, who was, as usual, in a hurry, was descending the hill at a trot, and pulled up on recognising the solitary wayfarer, at whom he glanced sharply.

‘Going up to my place, Foley?’ he asked. ‘Did you want to see me about anything?’

The fact was that Arthur could not very well have been bound for any other destination, and, all things considered, he thought himself entitled to prevaricate. There had been no rupture between him and his former Mentor; he had continued to act in some sort as Colonel Meynell’s subordinate, and had several times had to apply to the latter for instructions, so that this seemed to be a good opportunity for saying:

‘Well, I rather wanted to mention to you that it’s uncertain how far I may be able to dispose of my own time in future, and if you know of anybody who would be willing to replace me——’

‘Oh, I’ll find somebody!’ answered the Colonel briskly; ‘or if I can’t I’ll do the work myself. There won’t be much more cricket now, and indoor amuse-

ments don't require so much supervision. You wish to hand in your resignation, then, eh ?

'I think I had better, perhaps. Not that I have done much, or been allowed to do much.'

'You have done as much as you were asked to do, at all events, and we're not ungrateful. Does this mean that you are thinking of going away ?'

'Well, yes,' answered Arthur slowly, 'I am thinking of it. Yes; I should like to go away, if I can.'

He could not keep a slightly injured intonation out of his voice, and, notwithstanding the great change that had come over his prospects and intentions, he was not best pleased when the Colonel rejoined heartily :

'I am very glad to hear it; that is much the best thing that you can do. When do you propose to start ?'

Arthur explained that his project had not yet taken definite shape: he expected to be leaving Bridstow before long, that was all. In any case, he did not think that he could have kept up his work among the young fellows, such as it had been. And inwardly he reflected, 'You wouldn't have let me keep it up. You'll despise me and refuse to have anything more to do with me as soon as you know the truth, though you are more to blame than anybody else for what I suppose you will call my inconstancy.'

The Colonel looked as if he was waiting to be told a little more; but as Arthur remained silent, he put no further questions, and presently said :



‘ Well, I shall see you again before you go, I dare say. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll run on now; I’m a quarter of an hour behind time.’

When the sound of his rapidly-retreating footsteps had died away in the distance, Arthur sat down, staring moodily at the stream and the over-arching trees, some of which already showed touches of yellow and red here and there, and all the familiar landmarks. They seemed to be mutely reproaching him, and perhaps he deserved to be reproached; but it was so very essential that he should not begin to reproach himself! Not yet, anyhow; not until he should have got through that impending interview, which he was sensible of a craven longing to avoid. For the present, he must only remember that he had decisively, if not deliberately, separated himself from Rhoda Meynell, and must steadfastly bear in mind her behaviour at the picnic. It was not as if she had, or ever could have had, any love for him worthy of the name.

Now, whether he hoped that she would come soon, or that she would not come at all (and he was not quite certain what his hopes were), he could do no more than put himself in the way of meeting her, and his courage had not had time to suffer much further diminution when he became aware of her approach. She was stepping quickly downwards through the woods, with a basket upon her arm, as he had often seen her do before, and she did not catch sight of him until he had risen and advanced

a few paces towards her. Then she started and stood still, looking at him inquiringly, and a little apprehensively. He took off his hat, and, since one way of opening a conversation of which it is impossible to foresee the end serves as well as another, said :

‘I hope you didn’t over-tire yourself yesterday.’

‘Oh no,’ she answered, with a slight smile; ‘it wasn’t a very tiring expedition, was it?’

‘It was a rather tiresome one, I thought; but perhaps that isn’t the same thing. I was only afraid that you might have been fatigued by the long walk that you chose to add to it.’

‘To the farm, do you mean? Oh, that was nothing: four miles and a half, there and back, at the outside, with a good half-hour’s rest while we were listening to all the poor people’s grievances. I should be ashamed of myself if I couldn’t walk that distance without being fatigued.’

‘And you had congenial company—which makes all the difference, no doubt.’

His tone was cold, and he had so much the air of wishing to pick a quarrel that Rhoda formed conclusions. It was foolish of him to be jealous; but that kind of folly is one which no woman who ever lived is tempted to punish with severity, and she answered gently :

‘I always like talking to Lord Braunton; he is an old friend of ours, as you know. Besides, I was particularly anxious that he should see those tenants

of his himself. The truth is that they aren't good tenants, and the agent would be glad to get rid of them; but what can they do, poor things? They have a swarm of children, and no money in the bank, and every kind of misfortune has overtaken them during the last eighteen months. I wanted Lord Branton to hear their story at first hand; because of course things sound so different when they are reported by an agent.'

'And I suppose he promptly wiped out all arrears of rent, and gave them every penny that he had in his pocket.'

'He did better than that; he promised to put matters upon a more satisfactory footing, and give the poor creatures a chance of making both ends meet in future—which they can hardly be said to have had hitherto. Everybody knows that Lord Branton is a most merciful landlord; but with his wealth it is easy enough to be merciful. What I like about him is that he always tries to be just, and that he doesn't mind how much trouble he gives himself.'

'Oh, I have no doubt that he is great, good and wise,' said Arthur impatiently; 'and I dare say he is willing to take trouble when you ask him. Perhaps he wouldn't have taken it unless you had asked him, though. In all cases it is apt to be more a question of who asks than of what is asked for, isn't it? You, for instance, were not willing to take so much trouble as to walk up to the top of Brake Tor with me when I asked you.'

Rhoda looked down and bit her lip. She thought Arthur was treating her rather unfairly; but at the same time she was not insensible of the trials to which his temper and patience had been exposed.

'I don't think you ought to blame me for that,' she said at length, in a low voice; 'I don't think you ought to have asked me to walk away with you, knowing that I couldn't do it.' Then she raised her eyes frankly to his, and added, smiling a little: 'Indeed, I don't think you ought to have come to the picnic at all.'

'I wish to God I hadn't!' burst out the young man vehemently.

He was half inclined to tell her the whole truth; he was more than half ashamed of his shabby attempt to break with her upon the pretext that she had preferred Lord Braunton's society to his. Since she would have to despise him soon, why should she not hear the worst then and there? But the words which were on their way to his lips were driven back by her rejoinder.

'I won't pretend to misunderstand you,' she said. 'If you dislike my talking to Lord Braunton, or to anybody else, I am sorry for it; but I can't help it. We must not—neither you nor I must behave as if we were engaged to be married. I hoped you would have realized that.'

'I have realized that the position in which I am placed is an impossible and intolerable one,' returned Arthur sullenly. 'I have realized that your idea of

love is not the same as mine, and that you would far rather marry to please your brother than to please yourself; supposing, that is, that you feel much personal preference in the matter—which I am inclined to doubt. I admit that we are not engaged, but when your brother refused to hear of an engagement, I told him that I should still consider myself bound to you, and——’

‘And now you are sorry for having said so,’ interrupted Rhoda quietly. ‘I don’t at all wonder at that, and you may be sure that neither Victor nor I ever thought of taking you at your word. Why should you consider yourself bound to me?’

‘Oh, only because I imagined that you loved me. Seeing that you had just told me you did, there was some excuse for my mistake, perhaps.’

‘I told you nothing but the truth; I told you all along that Victor must decide for me,’ the girl answered. ‘It is not I who have placed you in an impossible or intolerable position, and if you mean, as I suppose you do, that it is intolerable on account of your having given a sort of promise which I never asked or wished you to give, I can only say again that I don’t consider you bound to me by it in the smallest degree.’

The colour had faded from her cheeks, but her voice remained under control, so that Arthur, who dared not look her in the face, was not without justification in assuming, as he did, that she was perfectly willing to set him free.



‘There isn’t much more to be said, then,’ he remarked bitterly. ‘It is true that I regret having given you that promise, and that I wish to withdraw it. I could tell you my reasons, only I don’t suppose that you would be interested in hearing them, and, after all, reasons which can’t be done away with or altered are hardly worth discussing.’

‘I would rather not hear them or discuss them,’ answered Rhoda steadily. ‘I must be going now, so I will say good-bye.’

‘How little you care!’ he exclaimed.

He could not repress that imprudent ejaculation, but she paid no attention to it, and resumed her downhill progress, leaving a most miserable man behind her. He had achieved his purpose, his liberty had been accorded to him without mention of names or even so much as an allusion to his true motives for claiming it; but he had been thoroughly disingenuous, and what was almost worse, he had been unable to maintain the self-deception with which he had set out. He could no longer pretend to himself that he had ceased to love Rhoda Meynell, nor had she said anything at all to prove that she had not ceased to love him. Well, it was useless to brood over the inevitable and irretrievable outcome of his own folly. He was so convinced of that that he sat down upon the bank of the stream, with his elbows on his knees and his head supported by his hands, and brooded over it for the best part of an hour.

At length he rose, shook his shoulders, and started

off at a quick, steady pace for the town. The past was over and done with, the sooner he plunged into the future the better it would be for him; and Lola Hamersley, he felt pretty sure, must be awaiting his advent. He had almost emerged from the wood, when he was hailed by an ascending pedestrian, in whom he recognised Lola's father, and who, after joining him and shaking him by the hand, said:

'You are the very man I wanted to see. I came across Meynell just now, and he told me that you were thinking of going away. Have you any settled plan, or is it that you are beginning to feel the need for a change of scene?'

'I have no plans at all,' answered Arthur. 'I haven't even spoken to my father upon the subject yet, but I mentioned to Colonel Meynell that I might probably be going away soon, because—well, I suppose because, as you say, I rather want a change of scene.'

'So I imagined. My reason for asking the question was that I also am beginning to feel that I must get away somewhere out of sight of civilization and stretch myself. Not to Asia, Africa, or America. No! those good old days are over for me, and I have a notion of running out to the Pyrenees for a few weeks and trying to knock over a few isards or bouquetins, and I was wondering whether it would suit your book to come with me. From all I can learn, the sport is likely to be indifferent; but we shall sleep out of doors, we shall be as far removed from the fashionable world as if we were in the Mountains of the

Moon, and I suppose we shall have some sort of a remote chance of breaking our necks. Does that prospect tempt you ?'

The prospect of breaking his neck appeared to Arthur at that moment to be about the most alluring that kind fortune could offer him ; but, apart from that, he felt very much disposed to close with Mr. Hamersley's proposal. He was quite determined that, come what might, he would leave Bridstow for a time, and this excuse for so doing would be an excellent one. There was, however, one question which had to be taken into account, but which had not presented itself to him until now, because his attention had been so fully occupied with other matters, What would Mr. Hamersley be likely to think of him as a son-in-law ? Upon the whole, there did not seem to be much reason to apprehend opposition from that quarter. Lord Braunton, to be sure, was a far bigger man than the future owner of St. Ann's ; but Robert Hamersley was no tufthunter, and Arthur had had more than one opportunity of noticing (not without surprise) that he was under petticoat government. Lola's wishes, it was safe to assume, would have her father's assent. Moreover, there would be a certain appropriateness and poetic justice about a marriage which would insure to his child the enjoyment of property which he had forfeited long ago. Still, while everything was as yet so undecided, it was impossible to say more than :

'I think I should like it very much, only I shall

have to find out whether my father can spare me ; and—and there are one or two other things. When do you mean to start ?

‘ Next week, perhaps ; but there’s no urgent hurry. We ought to bring our expedition to an end before the weather breaks and the first snow falls, that’s all. I shall be very glad if you can arrange to accompany me, and I should think your father might manage to do without you for three weeks. My daughter seems to think that she can get on very well without me for that length of time, anyhow.’

‘ What will she do while you are away ?’ asked Arthur wonderingly. ‘ Are you going to leave her at Bridstow all by herself ?’

‘ We haven’t quite made up our minds yet, but in all probability she will stay with the Brauntons. They will be very pleased to have her.’

Would they ? Arthur was not so sure that they would, after a certain piece of news should have been imparted to them ; but, of course, it might be that Mr. Hamersley would abandon his expedition on hearing what his daughter’s intentions were. Presently he remarked :

‘ I was on my way to call at your house when I met you.’

‘ Ah, you wouldn’t have found Lola at home !’ Mr. Hamersley answered ; ‘ she is up at Brauntton Towers, where she is to dine and spend the evening, I believe.’

Arthur drew a long breath. It was absurd to rejoice at a reprieve which could only be one of

twenty-four hours; but he could not help rejoicing, and the clouds gradually cleared away from his mental horizon while he entered upon a leisurely discussion about guns and rifles with his cousin. His nature—perhaps that is the nature of most human beings—was so constituted that he could sometimes fix his mind wholly upon the present, and put away from him all thought of the troubles which were waiting for him in the near future.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### PAS DE FAIBLESSE !

It is always satisfactory to have accomplished a task which you have said to yourself that you will accomplish, even though the achievement be so unambitious a one as putting a bullet into the bull's-eye at five hundred yards or solving a newspaper acrostic, and Lola Hamersley, who on the occasion of her first introduction to her cousin had inwardly determined to bring him to his knees at her feet before she had done with him, was modestly proud of her success. She had, it is true, fully expected to succeed; only, as a matter of fact, she had been within an ace of failure, and she knew it. But the question was (and this was, perhaps, the first time in her life that she had taken the trouble to put such a question to herself), what she was to do with her captive now that she had secured him. To marry him would be a



strong measure—a very strong measure indeed ; and yet, somehow or other, Lola did not relish the notion of dismissing him, and eventually seeing him married to somebody else. It was almost as if she had fallen in love with him ; she, who had never yet been, and intended never to be, seriously in love with any man upon the face of the earth.

She was startled and alarmed for a moment, though only for a moment, by the possibility which suggested itself to her. Young as she was, she had seen many men, and was able, in her opinion, to measure the limits of masculine constancy. Married men do not remain in love with their wives, and if they did they would be an abominable nuisance. To be made love to is pleasant, and to convert an indifferent acquaintance into an ardent lover is pleasanter still ; but to live all one's days with a man who is either obtrusively affectionate or flagrantly neglectful—no, thank you ! Ardent lovers (so Lola thought) always become the one or the other—generally the other. No ; one may have one's little preferences, but one must not push them to extravagant lengths ; one must espouse a sober, steady-going individual like Lord Branton, and not be so insane as to spurn a coronet and a large income.

Moreover, there was one reason for accepting Lord Branton which was of even greater weight than considerations of prudence and worldly wisdom. It was not difficult to foresee what the result of that amorous nobleman's rejection would be. He would

be deeply chagrined ; he would wear the willow for a time, then he would recover himself, come to his senses, and make his mother happy by taking that horrid little sanctimonious Rhoda Meynell to wife, which would be an altogether unendurable issue. As a rule, Lola was too selfish and indolent for hatred, just as she was too selfish and indolent for love ; but there existed within her a slumbering capacity for both passions, and she had felt from the outset that it would not take a very great deal to bring down a tempest of the former upon Miss Meynell's head. The girl had crossed her path—she had beaten the girl triumphantly once ; to be beaten by her in a second and perhaps more important encounter was what she would never be able to submit to. Was Arthur, then, to be abandoned to the horrid little sanctimonious one ? It looked as though that sacrifice was inevitable, and thus it came to pass that Miss Lola, driving up to Branton Towers, where, as has been mentioned, she had been invited to spend the afternoon and dine, was not in the best of humours either with herself or with her predestined husband.

She made up her mind on the way that matters should not be brought to an immediate crisis. Though poor dear Arthur might be doomed to ultimate dismissal, he should not be dismissed forthwith ; she had hitherto known how to prevent Lord Branton from declaring himself in plain terms, and she proposed to carry on a similar system of tactics for some little time to come. However, she meant to be very

kind to his lordship that afternoon, having been very unkind to him on the occasion of their last meeting, and being aware that there was an element of risk in trifling with so matter-of-fact a person.

Lord Braunton was not one of the tennis-players who waved their hats and their hands to her as her fly skirted the broad, level lawn on its approach to the imposing entrance-porch of his abode, nor did she discern his stooping figure amongst the spectators of the game. 'Sulking in the library, I presume,' was her inward comment upon his absence. 'Well, he will hear the wheels on the gravel, and he won't stay in the library much longer. I give him five minutes to swear that he isn't going to stir for me, another five minutes to discover that he can't write his letters while I am within easy reach of him, and perhaps five minutes more to run upstairs, wash his hands, brush his hair and make himself presentable—as if any amount of washing and brushing could make him presentable! A quarter of an hour—h'm! Hardly time enough to infuriate those red-faced young women by drawing Captain Annesley away from them and their unbecoming game. No; it won't do to attempt it; *soyons sage!*'

Lawn-tennis, it scarcely needs to be said, was not in Lola's line. Even if she had not been alive to the disadvantages of getting hot and red in the face, she would not have been disposed towards gratuitous exertion, and her only reason for forsaking her hostess, whom she found entertaining a few dowagers

in the great, cool drawing-room, was that she knew very well who would presently join her outside. And, indeed, she was not made to wait quite as long as she had anticipated. Hardly had she seated herself upon a wicker chair in the ranks of those who were watching their more active fellow-guests, hardly had she exchanged surreptitious signals with her flannel-clad Guardsman, who gave her to understand that he would be free in no time, and who at once put on a kind of service which ought never to be employed against a lady-opponent, than Lord Branton emerged from the house and sauntered across the grass, with an elaborate air of having strolled out by mere chance just to see what was going on.

When he recognised the new-comer—but this, apparently, was not until he was within a couple of yards of her—he snatched at his straw hat, held out his hand, and said, ‘Oh, how do you do, Miss Hamersley?’—after which he withdrew a few paces in order to take a vacant place beside a lady who had political opinions, and who promptly engaged him in a controversy about the prohibition of the opium trade with China.

Now, Lord Branton was really interested in this subject and was a strong advocate for the suggested prohibitory Act; still, for everything there is a season, and the moral welfare of the Celestial Empire, though doubtless a most desirable end in itself, was not likely to be sensibly promoted by a mere academic discussion in the garden of an English country house. On the

other hand, the moral welfare of a person in whom he was even more interested than he was in the heathen Chinese could not possibly derive any advantage from wandering off with that unscrupulous young beggar Annesley into the labyrinthine shrubberies which adjoined the garden aforesaid. Thus it was that, when the game had been brought to an end, and when Lord Branton had not only seen Captain Annesley make straight for Lola, but had heard the fellow say something to her about 'getting away into the shade,' he jumped up, abruptly cutting short his neighbour's discourse with a brusquerie which nothing but his well-known eccentricity and absent-mindedness could have excused.

A moment later he was saying, in hurried, embarrassed accents :

'You have never been in the walled garden, have you, Miss Hamersley? If you would care to see it now, I could take you there before tea-time. There are some—some flowers there, I believe.'

It seemed probable that there were flowers there ; but to what tribe or tribes they might belong Lord Branton, who was no horticulturist, knew no more than he knew why Lola had snubbed him so persistently of late. She did not, however, snub him this time. She turned her great, soft eyes upon him with a look of reproachful interrogation, as who should say, 'What have I done?' and then answered demurely :

'I should like very much to see the garden, if you are quite sure that I shall not be a bore to you.'



By what means she contrived to intimate to Captain Annesley that Lord Branton would be a very great bore to her, but that one must be civil to one's entertainer, signifies little, inasmuch as her short-sighted entertainer failed to detect that swift interchange of signals. The main thing in his opinion—and, for the matter of that, in Lola's also—was to shake off Captain Annesley, who picked up his racquet again rather dejectedly and returned to the tennis-court.

'I think,' Lola remarked calmly, when she and her companion had progressed a short distance on their way, 'that it is very forgiving of me to be here at all, after the manner in which you went on yesterday.'

'The manner in which I went on!' exclaimed Lord Branton, aghast; for, indeed, he had a crow to pluck with Lola respecting her own conduct at the picnic, besides which he felt justifiably aggrieved by a previous quarrel that she had forced upon him. 'I can't think what you mean! I am sure it was not I who went on in—in any conspicuous manner.'

'Didn't you? Then, if you prefer it, I will say that you went off in a conspicuous manner.'

'So did you,' Lord Branton remarked.

'I took a short walk with my cousin, I admit; but you can't very well know whether we made ourselves conspicuous or not, seeing that you were away the whole time with Miss Meynell. For a model of propriety, Miss Meynell certainly does some odd

things; but if you are satisfied, nobody else has a right to complain, I suppose.'

Lord Branton wrinkled up his forehead, tilted his hat over his nose, and walked on silently for some little distance before he rejoined:

'Miss Meynell, as you know, is a very old friend of ours; I wish you wouldn't speak about her in that way. It isn't sincere, and I don't see the good of it. She wanted me to have a talk with one of my tenants who is in trouble, and, of course, I couldn't refuse to go there with her when she asked me. Nobody, I am quite sure, ever dreamt of making the remarks about us that were made about you and young Foley.'

'Very well; nothing disrespectful shall be said in future about your friend, though I'm afraid I can't call her 'old' even to please you. What is sauce for the gander isn't sauce for the goose in these parts, and I suppose I must submit to having nasty remarks made about me and Arthur Foley, if I am goose enough to be good-natured and 'cousinly' in my relations with him. Still, I should have thought that you would have had more justice and common-sense than to upbraid me for selecting him as my partner after you had deserted me. I couldn't sit alone the whole afternoon awaiting your good pleasure, and as I had to talk to somebody, it seemed to me that my cousin was a safer person, upon the whole, to pair off with than Captain Annesley, for instance.'

Lord Branton did not at once respond to these seemingly unequivocal overtures. Infatuated though

he might be, he was neither blind nor stupid, and he had long ere this been forced to admit to himself that the woman whom he loved was not trustworthy. Yet, he not only loved her, but wanted, if he possibly could, to believe in her. So he led the way into the walled garden which had been the pride and delight of more than one dead and gone Lady Braunton, and having conducted his companion to a rustic bench in the shade whence the brilliant parterres, the clipped yews, and the moss-grown centre fountain, with its circular basin and its water-lilies, could be admired by those who had a fancy for stiff, old-world arrangements, embarked upon a statement for which she was fully prepared.

It was time, he said, that they should come to a mutual understanding. No doubt she understood him, and it would be no news to her to hear that he loved her more dearly than anybody or anything in the world; but he must own that he did not entirely understand her. Sometimes she encouraged his fondest hopes, sometimes she led him to fear that she was simply amusing herself with him. There were features in her conduct which struck him as irreconcilable with her words, and he proceeded in his deliberate, rather pedantic fashion, to point out what these were.

Lola had no difficulty at all in returning an evasive answer to his harangue. She pretended to be much diverted by his charges of inconsistency, declaring that they did not come very well from a man who had

notoriously jilted Miss Meynell, and who now seemed to be more than half inclined to repent of having done so.

‘I like the cool way in which you invite me to explain myself,’ she remarked. ‘What explanations do I owe to you, pray? I should have thought that it was for you to prove to me that you are neither inconstant nor inconsistent, and until you have done that, I shall not admit your right to cross-question me. Jealousy I can forgive; but you really must not claim the privilege of scolding me yet.’

Further than that he could not get her to commit herself, though he did his best. If he did not like the idea of being subjected to an indefinite period of probation, nothing compelled him, she said, to submit to it; she, on her side, would not submit to be bullied. And it was in vain that he strove to sweep away side-issues and narrow the question down to one which should admit of a plain and distinct reply. She eluded him and laughed at him, knowing that he must needs accept her terms, charming him even while she provoked him, and while he recognised the insincerity that mocked his own straightforward honesty.

All this was great fun to Lola; yet every now and again her enjoyment was marred by a twinge of something which certainly was not compunction, but may have been regret. It would have been delightful to torment Arthur in that way; somehow, it was not quite as delightful as it ought to have been to torment

Lord Braunton—and why was it not? To be sure, the excitement of the chase is over when the quarry has been run down; but Arthur was as completely at her mercy as this other man was. Why, then, could she not dismiss the memory of Arthur's piteous eyes?—and what was it that lent to the less clear orbs which were now gazing at her through a pair of strong spectacles, an aspect at once so ludicrous and so exasperating that she was tempted to turn her back finally upon their puzzled owner without more ado?

She adopted no such foolish and impulsive measure; but so conscious was she that she was gradually losing hold over herself, and so well aware was she of the consequences which were apt to ensue on those rare occasions when her hot, southern temperament got the better of her, that she was relieved to see Lady Braunton advancing beneath a sunshade to interrupt the interview. Lady Braunton was only too anxious to interrupt an interview which would never have taken place, had it been in her power to prevent it. She said, in a tone which, for her, was almost cross:

'They told me I should find you here; I couldn't think what had become of you both. My dear, what is this that I hear about your father rushing off to the South of France?'

'He talks of going,' answered Lola composedly.

'And leaving you in lodgings all by yourself? But really, you know, he can't do that.'

'I am afraid he can't do anything else. You see, it



is such a long time since he shot any four-legged animal, and it seems that there are animals of some sort to be shot in the Pyrenees. As for me, I would a great deal rather be left behind than planted down at a hotel in some Pyrenean watering-place ; I am not at all afraid of solitude.'

Lady Branton bit her lip. She knew very well what was expected of her, and, indeed, she remembered having once said to Mr. Hamersley that she would be delighted to take charge of his daughter for him if at any time business or pleasure should cause him to leave Bridstow for a few weeks ; but that had been when Branton's case had seemed to her well-nigh hopeless. She did not so regard it now, and she was not at all anxious to have Lola in the house. But her palpable hesitation was of no service to her. She was beginning to observe, somewhat irritably, that most girls would be only too glad to have a chance of visiting one of the most beautiful mountain districts in Europe, when her son interrupted her without ceremony.

'It would be out of the question for you to remain alone in Bridstow,' he declared, addressing Miss Hamersley ; 'of course you must come to us. When does your father propose to start ? Please tell them, mother, that the pink room is to be kept for Miss Hamersley.'

Then Lady Branton, in her disappointment and mortification, said a foolish thing.

'I don't know about the pink room,' she answered ;

'I thought you wanted that to be reserved for Rhoda Meynell. You were saying yesterday that she was looking out of sorts, and that you hoped we might persuade her to come here for a time. I presume that, if she does come, you would like her to occupy the room which has always been considered hers.'

Lord Braunton reddened, and Lola took in the situation at a glance. She had half suspected what she now felt sure of. The man was tired of being trifled with; he had resolved to come to an understanding with her that afternoon, and had doubtless also resolved that, in the event of her refusing him, he would gratify his mother by returning penitently to his first love. This could not be permitted. If, a few minutes back, she had been tempted to turn Lord Braunton adrift for the sake of a youth who was neither titled nor wealthy, she was now no longer in peril of being vanquished by that temptation. Come what might, Rhoda Meynell should never reign as mistress at Braunton Towers. That she might some day reign as mistress at St. Ann's was a possible contingency, but by no means a certainty. 'We will see about that later on,' Lola said to herself, with an inward forecast of future developments which would have horrified Lord Braunton, had he deemed her capable of harbouring such ideas.

Thus Arthur Foley's sentence was definitely pronounced: thus, too, was an amiable lady and excellent mother driven to doubt whether Providence, after all, ever busies itself in disentangling the imbroglios in

which poor short-sighted mortals are wont to involve their affairs. For Lola good-naturedly said that if she couldn't have the pink room, one of another colour would suit her complexion equally well.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### TOUCH AND GO.

LOLA HAMERSLEY, who was very little of an English-woman either in her ideas or in her habits, favoured the foreign custom of breakfasting in her own room, so that her father seldom saw her before noon. It was not until the luncheon hour on the day succeeding that treated of in the last chapter that he was allowed the privilege of greeting her, and his first glance at her warned him that she was in one of her troublesome moods. He had learnt to dread the periodical recurrence of these moods of hers—moods which lasted sometimes for several days, and which were all the more successful in rendering him wretched, because he was aware that they were not specially designed to do so, and that his daughter did not care a pin whether he was wretched or not. Weariness, depression, temporary derangement of health—whatever may have been the cause, such was their invariable effect, and it was not a little pathetic that Robert Hamersley, who, being something of a physiologist, regarded feminine infirmities in general with disdainful

toleration, should have permitted himself to be so put out by a trifling matter. Unhappily for him, he loved his only child with an intensity of which she probably did not suspect the existence, and which it was not in him to express in any manner intelligible to her. They never quarrelled, they never had reconciliations; but often they sulked, or appeared to sulk, with one another, often they would spend an hour together without exchanging a single remark, and if one of them suffered during these passing, causeless fits of estrangement, that one was assuredly not Lola. She was silent or talkative, amiable or cross, just as she might happen to feel disposed. It never seemed to occur to her that her father was a person for whose comfort it was at all worth while to make an effort. As a matter of fact this never did occur to her.

Now, it was Mr. Hamersley's habit, as soon as he detected a downward barometrical tendency in the domestic atmosphere, to put forward a great show of cheerful loquacity with a view to counteracting it. He always failed, and was always eventually driven to await his daughter's recovery in patient silence; but this did not prevent him from reverting time after time to the old futile method, and now he could think of no more promising subject to dilate upon than the comforts and luxuries of Branton Towers, and the pleasantness of life in so well-ordered an establishment.

'I am delighted,' he wound up by remarking, 'to hear that the Brauntons have asked you to stay with

them while I am away. You are sure to amuse yourself well and have a good time of it there.'

'Yes,' said Lola.

'Lady Braunton wanted to know why I didn't take you to Bagnères de Bigorre, or Cauterets, or some such place; but I told her that I believed you would much rather remain where you are than undertake a hot, tedious journey through France, with nothing but the society of tourists to look forward to at the end of it.'

'Yes.'

Mr. Hamersley sighed audibly. He wanted to ask what was the matter, but knew that he would get no answer if he did, so he went on with his hopeless efforts at ignoring that anything was the matter. It is all very well to be an admirable conversationalist, but what is the use of conversing admirably when the person to whom your observations are addressed will not so much as take the trouble to listen to you? In vain Mr. Hamersley discussed their fellow-guests of the previous evening, in vain he related certain amusing anecdotes respecting some of them which had come to his knowledge, in vain he ventured upon the thorny topic of costume, and criticised the dresses of the younger ladies. His daughter made no response, and scarcely seemed to hear him. Her lacklustre eyes, when for a moment they chanced to meet his, had a look of dull animosity in them with which he was only too familiar. Perhaps it was not animosity that they expressed, perhaps it was only



weary indifference; either way it was unendurable. So at length, in despair, he made up his mind to say something which he had not intended to say as yet, but which he believed would at least have the effect of rousing her from her melancholy abstraction.

‘By the way, Arthur Foley talks of going with me to explore the solitudes of Mont Perdu. I shall not be sorry to have a companion, and it will do the boy good to be removed from this enervating climate.’

The shot told. Lola straightened herself in her chair, and her drooping eyelids rose as she asked sharply : ‘What is your object?’

‘In taking the young fellow with me? Oh, I have no object. I haven’t tried to persuade him. I don’t even know yet whether he means to go or not. I told him that he could, if he liked, and I think he may as well, for he seemed to be rather down in the mouth when I met him. A little *affaire de cœur*, I presume. Isn’t Miss Meynell the object of his youthful affections just now?’

Lola made no reply to this superfluous question. She considered frowningly for a few seconds, and then said :

‘He will go with you; but I don’t quite understand why you want him to go, seeing that you probably hate him almost as much as you hate his father.’

‘Have I ever said that I hated his father?’

‘I don’t remember; but it stands to reason that you must. Do you ever forgive a man who has injured you or got the better of you?’

Robert Hamersley smiled.

‘You give me a pretty character,’ he remarked.

‘I thought you prided yourself upon it.’

‘No; I don’t pride myself upon it. But it has often been a matter of life and death to me that other people should believe me to be relentless, and experience has taught me that it is very seldom safe to forgive a traitor. As for hatred, that is a foolish, purposeless sort of emotion. I am not aware of hating anybody—certainly not Arthur Foley, who hasn’t done me any injury, and whom I like well enough. At the same time, I should be sorry to deprive you of a companion who appears to suit you, and I am perfectly willing to leave him behind.’

His eyes were fixed steadily upon his daughter’s face as he made this offer; but no revelation, nor hint of any kind, was legible there. She had fallen back into her former listless attitude. If the subject had interested her for a moment, it apparently interested her no longer.

‘Oh, take him, if you want him,’ she answered indifferently; ‘take him away and do what you like with him. I think he has given me about as much entertainment as he is likely to give.’

Nevertheless, she was well aware that Arthur was going to provide her with excitement, if not with entertainment, that same afternoon. Her gloomy and obstinate taciturnity, which soon drove her father out of the house, was not, as it usually was, the mere outward sign of feelings which she did not care to

conceal. For once, she had something to conceal—something which she would fain have concealed from herself, which it behoved her to conceal from others, and which she was absolutely determined to conceal from Arthur Foley. She waited for him in the shabby drawing-room where he had so often visited her, and of which she had suddenly grown tired and sick. She knew that he would come presently, she knew almost exactly what he would say, and she wished with all her heart that the impending, unavoidable interview were over and done with. Excitement was well enough ; but the sort of excitement that attends the extraction of a tooth or the amputation of a limb is not what one wants ; nor, when such an ordeal is at hand, can one submit with equanimity to be kept waiting for it. Lola was kept waiting for nearly two hours before her ear caught the sound of a well-known step upon the stairs ; yet her bearing showed neither impatience nor agitation when Arthur, who looked both impatient and agitated, stepped quickly across the room to seize her hand.

‘I should have come yesterday,’ he thought it incumbent upon him to explain without delay, ‘only your father, whom I met on my way here, told me you had gone up to Braunton Towers.’

‘Why this breathless apology?’ she inquired, smiling lazily at him ; ‘won’t to-day do as well as yesterday? It goes without saying that I am charmed to see you ; but you haven’t any very urgent business to transact with me, I presume?’

She had not withdrawn her hand from his clasp, nor did he now release it.

‘Don’t pretend that you didn’t expect me,’ he said. ‘You must have expected me. You must have known that I wanted to say what you wouldn’t let me say at the picnic.’

‘Must I? And what was that, pray?’

He told her—using language more impassioned, perhaps, than sincere. He was not sure that he loved her; on his way down from St. Ann’s he had been quite sure that he did not love her, and that his heart still belonged wholly and entirely to Rhoda Meynell. But Rhoda was irretrievably lost to him, and now that he was once more under the magnetic spell of his cousin’s eyes, he did not find as much difficulty as he had anticipated in playing the traitor’s part. He might be unable to love Lola for herself; yet, like the surviving sister in Tennyson’s unattractive poem, he ‘loved her beauty passing well.’ So he poured forth a torrent of ardent vows, some of which, at any rate, bore the impress of veracity, and when he had made an end of speaking, she remarked, with calm appreciation:

‘You did that very creditably. One sees that you are not at your first essay.’

‘If you mean that you take me for a Don Juan,’ Arthur began, somewhat disconcerted, ‘all I can tell you is——’

He was interrupted by a peal of laughter.

‘Oh, but I don’t,’ Lola assured him; ‘I don’t,

really ! How could you think such a thing of me ? On the contrary, if you were to swear that Miss Meynell was your first-love, I should be capable of believing you ; though I shouldn't wonder if she had had a few predecessors. Oh no, my dear Arthur, you are not a Don Juan ; you are only an extremely susceptible young man with a wonderfully eloquent tongue. *Allons !* I forgive you ; let us say no more about it.'

Arthur rose and stood looking down upon her. He had turned rather white, and his brows were drawn together, for, indeed, he was in no temper to stand being trifled with.

'I don't know that you have anything to forgive me for,' he said curtly ; 'and I don't know that I have given you any reason to laugh at me. I have told you that I love you. I only wish to hear whether you love me enough to be my wife.'

'No more than that ? What moderation ! Would one not think that I had already confessed to being enamoured of you ! After that it would, of course, only remain to order the trousseau and send out the invitations for the wedding-feast. What makes you so much more delightful than other people is your supreme contempt for the complications of life.'

'So far as I am concerned, there are no complications,' returned Arthur, puzzled and irritated by her mocking tone. 'I don't say that there were none. I suppose you know what they were, and I dare say you'll agree with me that the less we speak about them henceforth



the better. They don't exist any longer ; I am absolutely free, and—and will you answer my question, please ?'

'Oh, they don't exist any longer ? And he wants an answer to his question, does he ? I seem to recollect that once upon a time there was a rather arrogant young gentleman—strange to relate, he is still rather arrogant—who defied me to bring him to my feet, although I had given him fair warning that that was just the one thing which I could undertake to do with any male human being. Here he is ; and, instead of heaping dust upon his head, he assumes all the airs of a conqueror. But it seems to me that it is I who have won a modest little victory, and that, if I don't choose to answer questions, it isn't my captive who will force answers out of me.'

'Am I to understand,' asked Arthur, in a hoarse trembling voice, 'that you have done all this deliberately for your own amusement ? Do you wish me to think that you are a fiend ? Do you wish me to believe that you have no love at all for me, and that you have been acting a part the whole time ?'

'More questions ! You are really incorrigible ! Well, to keep you quiet, I will answer one of them. I don't wish you to think me a fiend. As for the others, perhaps you would not be pleased with my answers if I were to give them candidly. By way of a change, let me ask you a question on my own score. Have I ever given you any excuse for imagining that I loved you ?'

‘You allowed me to kiss you!’

‘My dear cousin, between kisses and orange-blossoms there are many steps—strides even. Are you so fond of orange-blossoms? For my part, I find them too heavy and overpowering. I could not sit in the room with them, and on the day when I have to wear them I shall be sure of a headache. Nothing makes me so cross as a headache; nothing would distress me more than to be cross with you. That is why I won’t do you the unkindness of accepting the wreath which you insist upon brandishing under my nose.’

‘I suppose that means in plain English that, having made an utter fool of me, you now intend to throw me over?’

‘Does it mean that?’ asked Lola, yawning. ‘Even if it does, there is no need for you to look so ferocious. Admit, at least, that I have done you a good turn in curing you of your absurd weakness for the little Sunday-school miss.’

‘For God’s sake,’ burst out Arthur, ‘leave her alone! Insult me as much as you like—I dare say I deserve it for having been such an idiot as to believe in you—but don’t let us have any more cheap sneers at Miss Meynell. If you only knew how small and spiteful you look to me when you say such things, you wouldn’t think that that was the way to cure me of what you call my weakness for her!’

If he had been watching Lola narrowly he would have seen her wince; but he was not even look-

ing at her, and her retort was so coolly delivered that he gave himself no credit for having scored a point.

‘So the cure isn’t complete, after all?’ said she. ‘I am sorry for that, though it is a comfort to feel that I am not personally to blame. I have done the best that I could for you: short of espousing you, I could hardly have done more; and it is not very generous of you to abuse me because I am obliged to draw the line somewhere.’

Arthur was still standing up. He now seized his hat, and said:

‘Thank you; I think that will do. I don’t know whether you are ashamed of yourself or not—I suppose you wouldn’t tell me if you were—but I don’t mind telling you that you have made me feel more ashamed of myself than I ever felt in all my life; not on account of your having duped me, for it is no great disgrace to have been deceived, but because I have allowed you to lead me into being false to myself, as well as to—to another person.’

She laid a detaining hand upon his coat-sleeve.

‘Stop one moment,’ she said, and her voice was caressing, although it had not quite lost its intonation of mockery; ‘don’t go straight off to the other person and ask for a second rebuff. What a creature of impulse you are! Not many minutes ago you were vociferating that you adored me; now you seem to be convinced that you adored somebody else all the time. My poor, dear Arthur, you must learn to distinguish

your friends from your enemies, and try to believe what I told you just now, that life is complicated. Just suppose something which you may safely suppose, since it is true, that Miss Meynell has a lukewarm sort of affection for you, but doesn't intend to marry you; and suppose something else, which isn't absolutely impossible, that my affection for you is many degrees warmer than hers, but that I have reasons of my own for doubting whether we are fated to become man and wife, is it necessary to make a scene and a quarrel about what can't be helped? Isn't it much more sensible to make the best of things as they are? *Che sara sara*. Why shouldn't we continue to be friends and cousins, in spite of complications? Come, rather than let you go off in a rage I will make an indiscreet little confession to you. It is in the last degree unlikely that I shall ever care for my future husband a quarter as much as I care for you. Will that do?'

'Do!' returned Arthur scornfully, 'no, it certainly will not do; I am not quite so humble as that! You mean, of course, that you are going to marry Brauntton, but that you would like well enough to keep up a more or less Platonic flirtation with me after having secured the position that you covet. You will have to look out for some other victim. I am not exactly what you take me for, though Heaven knows you have managed to lower my opinion of myself about as far as it will go! However, there can't be a shadow of a doubt that you are what I take you for; I have

your own word for it. So we will have no scene and no quarrel, for you aren't worth either; but we will never be friends again. Most assuredly the fault is not yours if I can't distinguish between my friends and my enemies now.'

He was out of the room before she could stop him. Perhaps he was a little afraid of being stopped; perhaps, notwithstanding his brave words, he did not even yet trust himself entirely. Be that as it may, he did entirely despise himself, and if he had not already been anxious to quit the scene of his discomfiture, he would have felt it imperative upon him to do so now. At the front-door, as chance would have it, he almost ran into the arms of Robert Hamersley, to whom he said, without preface:

'When do you start for the Pyrenees? How soon could we start?'

'I am always ready to start for any quarter of the globe at twenty-four hours' notice,' answered the other quietly; 'but perhaps we had better make it forty-eight this time, unless you are in a very particular hurry. You can arrange to come with me, then?'

'Oh yes, I can go; and the day after to-morrow will suit perfectly. We might meet in London, because I must run up to-morrow to buy some things. Charing Cross, in time for the early boat, I suppose? All right! Good-bye till then.'

Robert Hamersley gazed after the young man's retreating form with a smile of satisfaction and relief.



‘So that was it!’ he mused. ‘I suspected as much, and, thank the Fates, it has ended in the right way. It was touch and go, though.’

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### A DOMESTIC BRAWL.

It had, in truth, been touch and go; and Robert Hamersley, who, like the rest of us, sometimes tried to deceive himself, but who, unlike the rest of us, very seldom succeeded, knew that it had. He would have been blind indeed if he had not noticed that his daughter had for some time past been bringing the powerful battery of her attractions to bear upon young Foley. He had heard rumours which everybody in the vicinity had heard, as to the causes of Miss Meynell's temporary banishment, and he had not been able to disguise from himself that Lola's behaviour admitted of more than one interpretation. There was, to be sure, the obvious interpretation—the one to which his own hopes and wishes, as well as his knowledge of her character, inclined him—that she had been actuated solely by ardour for the chase, and that she no more contemplated marrying Arthur after she should have him at her mercy than hunting men pursue a fox for the sake of cooking and eating the animal when killed.

But another possibility existed—a possibility rendered less extravagant by certain reminiscences of

Lola's beautiful, wayward, passionate mother, and by points of similarity between the dead woman and her child which had manifested themselves every now and again, notwithstanding the latter's accustomed languid serenity; a possibility the bare thought of which had sent the blood up to Robert Hamersley's head, and had caused him to set his teeth. Although he had somewhat contemptuously denied that he cherished so foolish and futile a sentiment as hatred against his cousin, it was nevertheless true that he did hate the man who had supplanted him with all his heart and soul. Often in years gone by had he longed to have the owner of St. Ann's with him upon some lonely pass of the Andes, where a man's life might be taken and lost without risk or questions asked. The domestic bereavements which had befallen Mr. Foley, and of which news had reached his ears from time to time, had been a source of silent exultation to him, had almost made him believe that there must be an avenging Deity somewhere or other, had sometimes led him to hope that the one surviving son, who still stood between him and what he chose to consider his birthright, might follow the elder brothers, and that so the inexorable march of events might, for once, serve the ends of justice. The inexorable march of events, supplemented by that of time, had, however, somewhat blunted the edge of these rancorous feelings. Robert Hamersley was no longer young, no longer even middle-aged; he had saved a little money. He did not care much about

money; he did not care as much about St. Ann's as he had formerly done; nor had it been with any hostile intention against his cousin that he had reappeared in Bridstow almost simultaneously with the latter, and after an equally protracted period of absence. His object had been, and was, simply to secure wealth and position for Lola—for Lola, who cared a great deal about money and a good deal about position—for Lola, whom he loved but hardly understood, and whose future, since she had ceased to be a child, had inspired him with many grave misgivings. She had had chances before this; but, owing to indifference or perversity, she had not chosen to follow them up. Towards Branton she seemed to be favourably disposed; and Branton was, no doubt, the very man for her. Therefore Mr. Hamersley had submitted uncomplainingly to the dulness of daily life in a sequestered little seaside village; therefore, also, his habitual self-control had been sorely tried by the incidents of the past week or two.

But now all was well. The weight of apprehension was off his mind. Lola had evidently done what he had been torturing himself all the afternoon with fears that she would not do. For anything that he cared, Arthur Foley might now do as he pleased about shooting izards or staying at home. He had seen the young man enter the house. He had guessed what was taking place behind the venetian blinds, at which he had kept glancing while he paced restlessly to and fro upon the shingle outside, and he had had some

difficulty in restraining himself from cutting short a colloquy which, to his impatience, had seemed interminable. Well, he was glad that he had done that. Lola was not amenable to discipline. Bit and spur were not to be used with her save in the very last resort, and although, had it been necessary to fight her, he believed that he would have proved victorious, the necessity would have been horribly painful to him. As he mounted the staircase he rejoiced to think that she had not driven him to extremities, hoping also that he might find her in a less gloomy mood than that in which he had left her.

He found her, at all events, in a very different mood, for she thrust her handkerchief into her pocket as he entered; her eyes were swimming in tears, and she greeted him with a laugh which sounded suspiciously hysterical.

‘Didn’t I tell you that he would go with you?’ she asked. ‘I am sure he means to go with you, though he said nothing about it to me. You must have met him at the door. You were waiting for him, perhaps?’

Now, Lola, who seldom laughed, never wept; so that her father was troubled by these unwonted symptoms of emotion—or would have been troubled had he not felt certain that the danger was over. Anyhow, his best plan clearly was to ignore them, and he did so.

‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘I have just had a few words with Arthur Foley, who is to join me in London the day

after to-morrow. He is in such a hurry to be off that he himself proposes to leave early to-morrow morning. I happened to see him ringing the door bell some time ago, and, as you suppose, I waited about outside in the hope of getting a look at him when he emerged. Naturally, I was rather anxious to get a look at him after the way in which you spoke at luncheon.'

Lola raised her brows. The tears had vanished from her eyes, but there were still some strange, uncontrollable vibrations in her voice, as she said ironically :

'So you were really anxious! I thought you were; although you might have known me better, and although I assured you that you were at liberty to remove that dangerous young man from the neighbourhood as soon as you liked. What surprises me is that you should have considered the matter worth worrying about. Suppose I had cast myself into the arms of the dangerous young man—what then? He wouldn't have been quite so showy a son-in-law as Lord Braunton, it is true; but, to do you justice, love of ostentation is not one of your weaknesses, and Ar'hur Foley would have answered the purpose of providing for me and taking me off your hands as well as another.'

The implied reproach was hardly deserved. But Mr. Hamersley remembered that he had not cared to have his daughter with him during her childhood; that his affection for her was, after all, an affair of



recent, though rapid, growth, and that he could not expect to reap where he had neglected to sow. Without attempting to defend himself, therefore, he only replied :

‘We won’t discuss what might have been ; it is enough that you have refused him.’

‘Who told you that I had refused him ?’

‘Why, you yourself, if there is any meaning in words,’ answered Mr. Hamersley, with a rather uneasy smile. ‘Moreover, his face, when I encountered him just now, spoke for itself. Come, Lola, I think I understand pretty well what has happened. You have been playing with fire, as usual, and you have scorched your fingers a little for once ; but it is only a scorch, and you will have forgotten all about it in a day or two. Don’t pretend that you haven’t given the boy his dismissal.’

‘Oh, well, I have given him his dismissal, then!’ she returned impatiently. ‘Nobody could have been more formally and unequivocally dismissed. At the same time I warn you that that makes no difference—no difference at all. I could whistle him back to-morrow, if I chose, and I am not in the least certain that I won’t. Why shouldn’t I?’

‘Because I won’t have it!’ her father flashed out suddenly.

It was an unwise thing to say, considering that Arthur would not be out of reach on the morrow, and that his daughter was a refractory subject ; but he was accustomed to command, he was quite unaccus-

tomed to disobedience, and the girl's perversity irritated him.

'Oh, you won't have it?' she repeated slowly and composedly. 'It remains to be seen whether you can prevent it. What makes you speak to me like that?'

'I speak to you like that, my dear girl, because I mean what I say. You charged me to-day with hating the man who tried to ruin me once upon a time, and who undoubtedly did put a very stiff spoke in my wheels. I told you that I didn't hate him; but for all that I don't precisely love him, and nothing would induce me to let a daughter of mine marry his son. You must take this as final, please. I believe your own common-sense is a sufficient safeguard; but you are capable of a *coup de tête*, so it is as well that you should know what my determination is.'

'A *coup de tête*? Yes; I shouldn't wonder if I were capable of that. And supposing that I were to hit my head against your determination, which would break, do you think? You should not try to bully me, for I know my own power; and I know that, if it suited me to marry Arthur Foley, neither you nor anybody else upon the face of the earth could stop me. As you say, my own common-sense is my best safeguard—and yours. I would leave it alone if I were you.'

So there really was to be a fight, it seemed, and Robert Hamersley was not the man to decline a

combat, no matter from what quarter the challenge might reach him.

‘You are talking nonsense, Lola,’ he said sharply. ‘I have not been tyrannical or dictatorial with you; I have not told you that you shall take this or that man for your husband; but I do say that I will never permit you to marry Arthur Foley, and you must be aware that if you drive me to extremities I can enforce submission.’

‘I am aware of no such thing! Why do you tempt me to prove to you that I am not one of those simple savages whom you have been in the habit of terrifying by shouting to them in a formidable voice that you are their master? Nobody is my master, and nobody ever will be. To tell you the truth, it was partly for that reason that I sent away Arthur Foley, though I love him. Yes, since you like plain language, there it is for you. I love him!’

She looked splendidly handsome as she stood erect there, confronting the obstinate, resolute man, who, if he did not absolutely quail before her, nevertheless shuddered slightly at the sound of an avowal to which, perhaps, no father has ever yet been able to listen without some inward shrinking.

‘Don’t say such things!’ he exclaimed. ‘They are not only undutiful; they are—unmaidenly.’

She broke into a scornful laugh.

‘But for what do you take me, then?’ she asked. ‘Would you like to have a good little, obedient daughter of the Miss Meynell type, who would do as

she was told, and know nothing about anything? *Vous n'êtes pas difficile*, only it is rather too late in the day to provide yourself with that article now. You should have left me at the Sacré Coeur, and arranged a marriage for me the moment that the good Sisters handed me over to you to be disposed of according to your wishes. You allowed me to grow up as best I might here, there, anywhere. At Rio, for example, one grows up quickly, and the result is that I am what I am. You ought to be very thankful, it seems to me, that I have done nothing more unmaidenly than to confess my love for a man who has asked me to marry him. "Undutiful" is a comical word, coming from you. Why should I be dutiful, pray? What have you ever done for me, beyond paying the cost of my keep and education, which I suppose the law might have compelled you to pay? Should I be living with you now if I had been deformed or ugly? You know very well that I should not.'

The words were cruel enough, yet they were not entirely without truth or justification. Robert Hamersley had no reply to make to this unexpected outburst—the revelation of a long-slumbering resentment and sense of desertion, of who knows what childish miseries, mortifications, heart-burnings. He bowed his head for a moment, and then said :

'Let it be agreed that I have been to blame ; the past is past. I will make such amends as I can for the future. Only on this point I cannot and will not give way. You must not ask it of me, Lola.'

‘Was I asking you to give way? I thought, on the contrary, I was telling you how very little it signifies to me whether you give way or not; almost as little as it signifies to you whether I marry a man whom I love or somebody else. The chances are that I shall marry someone else. The chances are that I shall marry Lord Braunton; but that will be because, upon the whole, I prefer common-sense to nonsense, not because I accept your definition of either. In a word, I shall please myself—now and always.’

Her father was upon the point of making a rejoinder, which died away upon his lips; for, advancing with raised hand to emphasize his words, he changed his position slightly, and so became aware that his daughter and he were no longer the sole occupants of the room. How had Lord Braunton found his way in unnoticed and unannounced? How long had he been there? How much had he heard? These were agitating and important questions, but no decisive reply to them could be obtained from the demeanour of the short-sighted nobleman, who only showed that he was conscious of having interrupted a family brawl by the considerate manner in which he avoided looking at either combatant, and the unwonted volubility with which he began to talk.

When he had related at unnecessary length how he had told the maid-servant who had admitted him that he would find his own way upstairs, how he had knocked twice at the door, and how, receiving no answer, he had taken the liberty of turning the handle,



he proceeded to unfold the nature of his errand. He had been commissioned by his mother, it appeared, to ask how soon they might expect the pleasure of Miss Hamersley's promised visit. If her father could be induced to spare her to them as early as on the following day that would be delightful, for it had been suddenly decided to get up a little impromptu dance, in arranging the details of which her aid would be invaluable. He did not know much about such matters himself, not being a dancing man, but he believed there was to be a cotillon, and cotillons, he was informed, were all the better for being rehearsed in advance—and so forth, and so forth. All this afforded, as it was doubtless intended to afford, the Hamersleys time to recover their self-possession, a quality which seldom deserted either of them in moments of emergency.

'It is most kind of you and Lady Braunton,' Mr. Hamersley hastened to reply, 'and Lola will be only too happy to join you as soon as you like. In fact, I shall be leaving this either to-morrow night or early the next morning; so that your invitation comes quite in the nick of time.'

Lola was equally composed, and a good deal more audacious.

'Lord Braunton resembles his invitation in that respect,' she observed tranquilly; 'if ever a man arrived in the nick of time he did. It isn't often,' she added, 'that my father and I fall out, but we were fighting like cat and dog when you appeared, and I

dare say we should have been at one another's throats presently if you hadn't dropped in, like an opportune pinch of snuff, to separate us. You may have overheard some startling things ; but you have only yourself to blame for that. It wasn't enough to be a pinch of snuff ; you ought to have thrown in the sneeze as well.'

Lord Braunton had removed his spectacles, and was diligently polishing them with a large silk handkerchief. That he was a little taken aback was pretty evident ; but his reply, when he found one, was creditable enough.

'I make it a rule never to overhear anything that I am not meant to overhear,' said he.

It was the answer of an honest man and a gentleman ; but it had the misfortune of being addressed to one whose sex, no less than her personal character, rendered her incapable of appreciating its full significance. When Lord Braunton had taken his leave, Lola remarked quietly to her father :

'You are in luck. Our good friend knows for certain now that I am not enamoured of him, and he would like to throw me over if he could. It isn't very probable that I shall allow him to do that, although I might have made up my mind to throw him over if you had persisted much longer with your ill-advised hectoring.'

## CHAPTER XIX.

## ARTHUR IS DULY CAUTIONED.

THAT our nature is complex and contradictory, that more than one force is at work within us, directing our actions, triumphing over what we are pleased to call our will, and causing us not unfrequently to behave in a manner which we afterwards find incomprehensible, is a discovery which was probably made at a very early epoch in the history of the human race. 'What I would,' says St. Paul, 'that do I not: but what I would not, that do I. . . . Now, then, it is no more I that do it!' But the consolation, if it be intended for such, is at best a sorry one. The word 'I' apparently covers both the good and the evil tendencies, and has, at all events, to be held responsible in a poor, purblind world for the deeds promoted by each. Otherwise we should have our houses broken into and our lives endangered with a frequency destructive of all comfort.

And little comfort was Arthur Foley able to derive from repeating to himself that he had been insane, that he had been bewitched, that his eyes had been opened at last, that he had never really ceased to love Rhoda Meynell, nor ever really loved Lola Hamersley, with a good deal more to the like effect. Nobody believes in witchcraft nowadays, the plea of insanity cannot be accepted until its existence has been certified by competent medical authority; and what-

ever excuses he might adduce for the salving of his personal conscience, the facts remained that he had deliberately severed the last tie which had bound him to the girl whom he loved, and had transferred his allegiance to another, by whom (as a matter of detail) he had been laughed out of court. It was he who had done these things, and undoubtedly it was he who would have to pay the penalty. So that it did not, after all, seem to matter very much whether he was excusable or not.

Indeed, as he strode out of Bridstow, with hasty, irregular steps, elbowing the passers-by and stumbling over every obstruction that lay in his path, his conviction was that, so far as he was concerned, nothing mattered much, or ever would matter much again. He was an utter, hopeless, disgraceful failure. His past could not by any possibility be redeemed; his future was not worth contemplating, and if a recruiting-sergeant had chanced at that moment to visit a town where recruiting-sergeants are seldom seen, it is quite upon the cards that a fine, able-bodied warrior would have been added to the number of those who already wear her Majesty's uniform.

It was not, however, a recruiting-sergeant, but an officer on the retired list, whom Arthur was destined to encounter, and thus he was reminded that, insignificant though petty annoyances may seem in the presence of great calamities, they nevertheless do not cease to be perceptible by reason of their pettiness. The very last man in the world whom he would have

wished to meet just then was Colonel Meynell ; but there the Colonel was, within touch of him, and through sheer force of habit he stood still, instead of passing on with a nod. Having done this unnecessary thing, and being conscious of the other's inquiring gaze, he thought he might as well explain ; so he said hurriedly :

‘ Oh, I wanted just to bid you good-bye ; I'm off to-morrow morning.’

‘ To - morrow morning ?’ repeated the Colonel. ‘ That's quick work.’

‘ Well, I took the first chance that offered, you know. I'm going to the Pyrenees with my cousin, Robert Hamersley, who hopes to get a few weeks of wild shooting there.’

‘ Oh, you'll be back again in a few weeks, then ?’

‘ I think not ; but I haven't made any plans yet, there hasn't been time,’ answered the young man. He added rather bitterly—for he had fancied that there was a touch of disappointment in the Colonel's voice—‘ You need not feel at all alarmed. I promise you that Bridstow will see no more of me than I can help after this.’

‘ I am not alarmed,’ the Colonel declared ; ‘ not in the way that you mean, anyhow. I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I were to say that I felt a little bit alarmed on your own account.’

Arthur shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, not wishing to be preached to, and assuming that some sage counsels were about to be bestowed upon him.



‘I’m not going to commit suicide, if that’s what you’re afraid of,’ he answered, with a forced laugh.

‘I should hope not; but a man may destroy himself in more ways than one, as you know. Look here, Foley; I quite understand your being in a rage with me, and perhaps I’m not over and above pleased with you; but there ought not to be any real ill feeling between us. Now, tell me, like a good fellow—can I help you in any way?’

‘I don’t see that you can, thank you,’ answered Arthur coldly; ‘it’s a little too late in the day for that.’

Colonel Meynell did not take offence. He said:

‘Perhaps it isn’t. Perhaps—if you’ll forgive my bluntness—it may not be too late to save you from making an ass of yourself. I can put two and two together, and when Rhoda told me of what passed between you yesterday afternoon——’

‘Why should she have told you anything about it?’ interrupted Arthur angrily. ‘Is it necessary that every single word she has said or heard in the twenty-four hours should be reported to you?’

‘Very likely she thinks so. At all events, she did tell me, and when she did, I guessed how the land lay. Don’t behave like a fractious child, Foley; don’t imagine that you will hurt anybody but yourself by that sort of thing. Above all, don’t fall into any delusion about Miss Hamersley. I have had my eye upon her for some time past; I have been able to study her rather more dispassionately, I think, than

you can have done, and I believe I can tell you in one word what she is.'

'Oh, indeed! What is she, then?'

'An adventuress, my dear fellow. To put it coarsely, she has been flying at higher game than you; but, in the event of a disappointment, you wouldn't be altogether beneath her notice. So, if you will be advised by me, you will beware of her.'

This fairly exhausted Arthur's patience.

'You are not the only person who has put two and two together,' he returned. 'Even I, childish and fractious and all the rest of it as I am, have wit enough to understand why you have kept an eye upon my cousin, and I don't know about its having been such a very dispassionate one, either. Of course, what you have wanted all along has been to marry your sister to Branton, and, of course, you have been alarmed by his attentions in another quarter. That is natural enough; but it doesn't quite give you the right to call my cousin an adventuress.'

The colour rose into Colonel Meynell's swarthy cheeks, for he was constitutionally hot-tempered; but he had long ago got the upper hand of his temper, and he answered quietly:

'I owe you an apology. To tell you the truth, I had forgotten for the moment that Miss Hamersley was your cousin. I am afraid I can't withdraw the word, though; and I don't want to withdraw the caution. Women, I believe, often marry out of pique, and by way of spiting somebody who hasn't suffi-

ciently appreciated them. It is a silly and dangerous thing to do; still, there are various excuses for them, and the result isn't always as calamitous as might have been expected. But there's no sort of excuse for a man who behaves in that way, nor any hope of a happy result in his case. Men, you may be sure, never fall in love with their wives after marriage. Now, it is certain that you are not in love with Miss Hamersley, and——'

'Why is it certain?' Arthur demanded, interrupting his Mentor for the second time. 'Men, as well as women, may make mistakes and change their minds sometimes, I suppose—especially childish and fractious men. A man may find out that he has been totally mistaken in a woman whom he has loved, and after she has dismissed him he may fall in love with another woman. It wouldn't be hearing the other woman described as an adventuress that would deter him, anyhow.'

The Colonel scrutinized the speaker for a minute with a sort of stern compassion.

'If you are serious,' he observed at length, 'there is nothing more to be said.'

'Nothing at all,' Arthur agreed impatiently.

A few minutes later he had resumed his homeward march, and the Colonel was out of sight. Why he had spoken as he had done, and why, while he was about it, he had not told the whole truth, he hardly knew. He might just as well have told the whole truth, which was sure to become known before long.

But there had been a kind of savage satisfaction in making the worst of himself, and Colonel Meynell, whom he still regarded as the author of all his misfortunes, had, it must be owned, been excessively provoking. Not that it signified one way or the other. He was going to turn his back upon Bridstow for ever, and the only point which called for immediate, practical consideration was how this news was to be broken to his father.

He tried to think things over while dressing for dinner, though his brains were not in very clear working order, and came to the conclusion that the news had better be broken by post. For the present it would suffice to announce that he was about to absent himself for a few weeks on a shooting expedition with Mr. Hamersley. One excellent reason for not stating whither he meant to go on conclusion of that expedition was that he did not know. Some place which was favoured with a pestilential climate and an abundance of wild beasts and poisonous reptiles would suit him best, he thought. But perhaps it would be scarcely advisable to say so.

But Mr. Foley, when somewhat abruptly informed, after dinner, of his son's impending departure, seemed to think that the Pyrenees would afford quite dangers enough. He turned perceptibly pale as he exclaimed :

‘I don't like this, Arthur—I don't like it a bit! What does it all mean?’

‘I should be the better for a change, and I want to shoot something rather bigger than a rabbit for once

in a way, and I may never get such an opportunity again,' answered Arthur evasively.

'Oh, nonsense! he must have some stronger means of persuasion than that. What has he been saying to you?'

'Who, Mr. Hamersley? He hasn't said much, and he didn't use any persuasion at all. He only mentioned yesterday that he was going, and suggested that I might like to join him.'

'Then he must have known that, for some reason or other, you would jump at the suggestion.'

'Very likely he did. In fact, I suppose he knows well enough that I have reasons for wanting to get out of the place. So do you, for the matter of that.'

'Yes, yes; and I shouldn't be sorry to hear of your retiring from the scene for a time if you were to have any other travelling companion than Robert Hamersley. But it is not safe for you to go with that man. He is not to be trusted, believe me.'

'Why? Do you think he is leading me off into the wilds to murder me quietly, like the wicked uncle in an old-fashioned drama?' asked Arthur, with a short laugh.

Mr. Foley did not smile. 'Crimes never go out of fashion,' he said. 'In the mountains an accident is easily contrived, and if once Robert Hamersley could get rid of you, only one very uncertain life would stand between him and this property, remember. One need not apologize for entertaining such suspicions, knowing what his record is and what his principles



are. You yourself have heard him relate as coolly as possible how, on one occasion, he left his comrades to die of hunger, after robbing them of the little food they had left.'

It was necessary to disabuse Mr. Foley's mind of this outrageous notion, and in order to do that it likewise became necessary to say more than Arthur had originally contemplated saying. Little by little the whole story came out. It was not pleasant to reveal the secrets of one's heart to an unsympathetic listener; but Arthur knew that sooner or later his father would have to be told everything, and he was just then in a humour to find something like pleasure in self-inflicted punishment. He was so disgusted with himself, so humiliated, and so despairing, that all the world might have been made aware of his shame without sensibly increasing it. For the rest, his father showed more sympathy than he had anticipated.

'Matters seem to have got themselves into an awkward tangle with you, Arthur,' Mr. Foley remarked, smiling. 'I believe you are right in beating a retreat, although, as I said before, I wish you could have selected a more trustworthy escort. Meanwhile, I think you may congratulate yourself upon your escape. I will watch over your interests while you are away, and perhaps by the time that you return the horizon may be clearer than it is at present.'

Arthur shook his head. He thought it best not to mention that a return to St. Ann's was not included amongst his projects, but he said :

‘There isn’t any horizon of the kind that you mean for me. I have turned my back upon that for ever. Colonel Meynell knows, and Rhoda will soon know, how irrevocably I have turned my back upon it.’

‘Well, well. But I am old; I have seen many suns rise and set. You mustn’t expect me to take follies and mishaps as tragically as you do. At least, you are in no danger, I hope, of listening again to the seductive strains of that South American siren.’

‘I think I may safely say that I am in no danger of doing that,’ Arthur replied, with a grim compression of his lips.

‘Then all may yet be well. I won’t ask you to abandon this expedition—possibly Robert Hamersley may be as free from sinister intentions as you imagine—but I do ask you, as a concession to my nervousness, to keep him out of temptation’s way. Always walk behind him when he is carrying a rifle, and don’t stand on the edge of a precipice beside him, unless some third person is present; not even then, if you can help it.’

Arthur gave the requested promise, smiling in spite of his wretchedness. He was grateful to his father for having abstained from rebuking him, and the two men became more friendly together that evening than they had ever been before, perhaps, in their lives. As for a perfect mutual understanding, that was not attainable. Mr. Foley, as he had pleaded, could not be expected to share a young fellow’s point of view, nor was Arthur old enough to have learnt

what queer changes and developments the course of time is for ever bringing about.

That in the case of certain persons changes occur with bewildering rapidity Arthur was destined to be made aware no later than on the following morning, when he drove down to the railway-station to catch the early express for London. Hardly had he taken his place when a tall female figure, which, at that hour of the day, and for several succeeding hours, was wont to remain horizontal and invisible, advanced rapidly across the platform and halted beside the window of the smoking carriage where he was seated. On recognising Lola he was too much amazed even to go through the customary formality of raising his hat. He could only stare at her, speechless and open-mouthed.

‘You are astonished?’ she said. ‘So is the station-master, and so are the porters. They all know me, and it must be confessed that this is a risky proceeding. Happily, we are cousins. One will have to dwell upon that circumstance if one is brought to book; and surely cousins ought not to part as we parted yesterday. You see what I have done for the sake of wishing you “bon voyage.” Don’t you think I deserve some trifle in the way of reward?’

Indignation got the better of Arthur’s good manners.

‘I don’t know what you mean or what you want,’ he returned brusquely. ‘Can’t you be satisfied with your triumph? Must you needs come here to gloat over me up to the very last moment?’

She shook her head gently.

‘Don’t quarrel with me,’ she entreated. ‘It isn’t necessary, and there isn’t time. I don’t wonder at your not knowing what I mean. How should you, when I don’t quite know myself? As for what I want—well, I suppose you won’t give me that. But perhaps you won’t grudge me one little scrap of information. Yesterday you told me that you loved me.’

‘Yes; but that was before I knew——’

She stretched her arm through the carriage window and laid her finger upon his lips.

‘No, no! don’t say the rest. I can imagine it. Only tell me whether, after you left me, you made the same protestation to somebody else?’

‘Of course not!’ he exclaimed. ‘How could such a thing be possible? How could you suppose——’

‘Oh, I can suppose a great deal, and you must admit that you have chopped and changed more than once already. I shouldn’t have blamed you if you had done it again; but I’m glad you didn’t. There is the guard putting his whistle to his lips. What shall I say to you—adieu or *au revoir*?’

‘Say anything you please,’ answered Arthur, striving, without much success, to look unconcerned. ‘Perhaps we may meet again some day, after you have become Lady Branton; but I don’t think it is particularly likely that we shall.’

‘Perhaps we may meet again before then—who knows? I am not Lady Branton yet. Meanwhile,

do me the favour to forget the horrid things that I said to you yesterday. I didn't mean them—not all of them, anyhow.'

Then, as the train began to move, she hastily detached a rose which she was wearing in her jacket and flung it on his knees.

'May you have good luck and plenty of sport,' she said; 'and may you bring back a more cheerful countenance than you are taking away with you!'

Her own was cheerful enough. She continued to smile and wave her gloved hand after him until a curve of the line hid her from his sight, when he got up, looked at her rose for a moment, and then tossed it contemptuously out upon the rails.

'No,' he muttered; 'fool as I am, I am not fool enough to be taken in a second time. And yet she can't be altogether a humbug—not half such a humbug as I was when I told her that I loved her. She would never have got out of bed at this hour, and come to the station, with the certainty of starting an avalanche of gossip, unless—well, I won't think about it. I have seen the last of her now, thank Heaven!'

## CHAPTER XX.

### IN ARRAGON.

Is it possible to be in love with two women at one and the same time? Imagination supplies the resounding negative, with which a chorus of readers, male



and female—especially female—will reply to such a query. Of course it is impossible, at a given moment, to entertain a sentiment worthy of the name of love for more than a single individual. It is even doubtful whether true love can be felt more than once in a lifetime, and anybody who maintains the contrary must be either a very ignorant or a very debased representative of humanity. So be it. Arthur Foley was quite of that opinion, while Arthur Foley's humble biographer is a good deal inclined thereto ; so that we are all of one mind upon the subject, and may keep cool.

Nevertheless, Arthur was not far wrong in thanking Heaven that he had (as he hoped and believed) seen the last of Lola Hamersley. If he did not love her, he had asseverated that he did, and what would have become of him if, instead of merely tossing him a rose at the railway station, she had informed him that his love was returned? What if she had declared that she was ready to throw prudence, ambition and Lord Braunton overboard for his sake? Mercifully, she had not gone so far ; he did not believe that she would ever go so far ; and thus it was superfluous for him to debate whether he was still in honour bound by a proposal which he had considered himself honourably bound to make. He did not debate the point more than he could help on the way up, and as soon as he reached London there were various purchases to be made, which kept his thoughts concentrated upon cartridges, sleeping-bags

and other paraphernalia, until nightfall ; but he could not help wondering what had been the consequences of her extraordinary action in rushing off before breakfast to take leave of him, nor was it without some mental disquietude that he awaited his travelling-companion at Charing Cross on the following morning.

But Mr. Hamersley, who arrived at the last moment, taking things very coolly, and paying no attention to the excited reminders of the officials that time was up, evidently knew nothing. He greeted his young cousin with much friendliness, stepped into the compartment which had been reserved for him (Mr. Hamersley was one of those fortunate people who always contrive to secure reserved compartments without paying for them), and remarked :

‘ I saw your father just before I started ; he seems to be rather nervous about you. I tried to persuade him that a man isn’t much more likely to meet with a violent death in the Pyrenees than in Regent Street ; but he said he had shot chamois in the Tyrol and knew what the dangers were. However, I promised that you should be most carefully looked after.’

Arthur, a little embarrassed by the recollection of what his father’s apprehensions really were, said something about natural parental anxiety, to which Mr. Hamersley replied :

‘ Oh, of course, I ought to be able to sympathize, being myself the father of an only child ; but I must

confess that I never feel very anxious about Lola. She has a head upon her shoulders, and is better qualified to look after me, I dare say, than I am to look after her.'

That sounded thoroughly reassuring, and, indeed, no further allusion to his daughter was made by Mr. Hamersley during the long journey, of which he beguiled the tedium by his pleasant talk and by various ingenious devices for killing time. Having provided himself with a pack of cards, he taught Arthur how to play euchre, and won the large sum of thirty francs from him between Calais and Paris. Also he imparted to him certain valuable hints, the result of many years' practical study in different quarters of the globe, as to the best means of tracking wild animals and approaching them when tracked. Once, being at a loss for anything else to do, he snatched a couple of walking sticks from the rack above his head, seated himself upon the floor of the coupé, and challenged his junior to a cock-fight, in which he came off victorious. He was like a school-boy out for a holiday, and his spirits ended by conquering to some extent the morose dejection of his fellow-traveller.

'At any rate,' Arthur thought, 'he doesn't suspect anything, and he means enjoying himself. I suppose I had better try to do the same, or look as if I did.'

Very few people, it may be assumed, can enjoy themselves, or even pretend to do so, in a railway carriage, and the vast, melancholy plains of the

Beauce country are enough to depress the most hilarious of tourists; but when Orleans and Tours and rocky Angoulême had been passed, when Bordeaux, where a night of stifling heat was spent, had been left behind, and when a first glimpse had been obtained of distant shadowy mountains and snow-covered peaks, showing faintly against a dark blue sky, Arthur began to admit to himself, not without reluctance, that life might still have its occasional good moments, in spite of all. This was the view taken by Robert Hamersley, and emphatically impressed by him more than once upon the younger man.

‘Depend upon it,’ said he, after they had at length escaped from railway trains, and had reached the green valley of Argeles, where guides and porters had been instructed by telegraph to await their arrival, ‘it is well worth a sportsman’s while to have been born. This world is a worrying, wearying place of habitation, I grant you; but, with a little money in his pocket, and a strong, healthy body like yours, he can always get away from the world and be happy. What the deuce does he care, when once he is camping out under the stars, for anybody or anything, except the beasts whom he hopes to lay low? For my own part, I make it a rule to leave my worries behind me with my frock coat and my tall hat, and I have never found the slightest difficulty in adhering to it.’

He looked sincere; probably he was so. Lola had given him a fright, but he knew, by instinct rather

than by experience, that his daughter was more prone to talking than to acting recklessly, and he had persuaded himself that all would be well. For some weeks to come, at any rate, he might with safety dismiss unpleasant subjects from his mind. And this brief return to wild, free life, artificial though it might be, and a poor substitute for the more distant expeditions which at his age he could scarcely hope to undertake again, was, in truth, an immense pleasure to him. It made him feel almost young again to study the map, to fix upon suitable spots for a bivouac, and discuss the weather prospects with the hard-featured old Basque chasseur whom he had engaged. The weather prospects were not altogether encouraging, for a heavy thunderstorm burst over Argeles an hour or two after the travellers had arrived at that place, and steady rain, which implied snow in the higher regions, was falling the next day. But Mr. Hamersley was resolved not to linger a moment longer than he could help in the haunts of civilization.

‘We’ll push on to Gavarnie, anyhow,’ he said. ‘If we can’t get any further, we must wait there until the sky clears, that’s all.’

So a carriage was ordered, and the day was spent in a long, up-hill drive, past the watering-places of St. Sauveur and Cauterets, to the confines of the celebrated Cirque de Gavarnie, where the road came to an end, and where, sure enough, snow was found to be lying on the ground. The little inn had been



deserted by summer tourists, which Mr. Hamersley said was a blessing, and the landlord shook his head when he heard that these heavily-equipped sportsmen proposed to cross the Breche de Roland on the morrow. The storm passed away, however, soon after sunset, stars began to glitter in a cloudless sky, and Mr. Hamersley would not hear of delaying the start for another twenty-four hours, in order that the freshly-fallen snow might have time to melt.

‘We have good legs,’ said he. ‘We aren’t afraid of a little fatigue. In fact, we are here for the express purpose of getting ourselves into condition, and the sooner we begin the better. Besides,’ he added, turning to Arthur with a laugh, ‘I left instructions that letters were to be forwarded to Gavarnie, and a whole pile might arrive before to-morrow evening, which wouldn’t suit me at all. I suppose you don’t want letters, do you?’

Arthur wanted them so little that he had not even deemed it necessary to furnish his father with an address, nor had he any wish to postpone his departure for those unfrequented hunting-grounds which his companion was so eager to reach. But he certainly was not in the best of condition, and the passage of the Breche de Roland tried him in wind and limb to a degree, which was all the more humiliating because Mr. Hamersley accomplished it without perceptible difficulty or discomfort. That stalwart veteran plodded steadily along through the soft snow, looking neither to right nor left, and

scarcely deigning to cast an approving glance upon the vast amphitheatre of precipices, which lovers of scenery travel from all parts of Europe to behold, or upon the far-famed waterfall, which is said to be the highest in the world. Only when the porters, groaning under their heavy burdens, pleaded that it was time to 'prendre une goutte,' would he consent to halt for a few minutes, and then he would neither join them in drinking thin red wine out of the goat-skin bottles that they carried, nor allow Arthur to unscrew his flask.

'No, no,' he said. 'You must learn to subdue your thirst, or it will subdue you. Hold a pebble in your mouth and look forward to the evening, when you shall drink as much as you like.'

It was impossible to help admiring the man, and, somehow or other, it was also impossible to help obeying him. The chasseurs and porters soon discovered that, although they probably had not set out with any intention of being particularly tractable, he had a quiet, matter-of-course way of giving orders, and a quiet fashion of looking straight into the eyes of the person to whom he gave them, which spared him many of those fights for supremacy to which less resolute mortals must needs make up their minds. From the first he took the command and kept it, decreeing where the mid-day halt should be made, and deciding, after a careful scrutiny through his field-glasses of the Spanish valleys, which came into view from the summit of the pass, upon the precise

place where the party were to encamp for the night. Perhaps he hit upon the right place ; at all events, his chief subordinate only raised a few perfunctory objections, to which no heed was paid. It was, in short, evident that he knew what he was about, and meant to take his own way ; it might even be surmised that anybody who should seriously attempt to prevent him from taking his own way would do so at the risk of being summarily dealt with.

For the rest, his good humour and indefatigable activity speedily won the hearts of the men, who were not much accustomed to meeting with strangers of this type. When, after a long and wearisome descent, the desolate valley which he had selected as their camping-place had been reached, he helped them to collect such dry wood as was obtainable, constructed a fire upon scientific principles, and showed them how to cook a soup which they were fain to admit was superior to anything that their own skill could have produced ; also he had provided the unwonted luxury of sleeping-bags for them all, and took care that everyone should be made as comfortable as he was himself.

‘ Who would believe that you had never been in this part of the world before in your life ! ’ Arthur exclaimed, laughing, when the natives were all snoring round the camp fire, and he himself, rested and refreshed, was smoking a last pipe with his cousin, preparatory to lying down upon the ground for the night,

‘Well, I have been in a good many other parts of the world, and mountains are mountains everywhere. I wish I could feel any confidence in the assurances of these fellows that we shall get a shot at some izards to-morrow. If we do, we must take care not to miss, or we shall lose all our prestige.’

There was little danger of Robert Hamersley’s missing an animal that could be hit, and as they were lucky enough to get within range of a herd of izards the next morning, he was able, by means of a rather difficult shot, to show what his capabilities were. Arthur was not equally successful; yet he, too, obtained a chance later in the day of retrieving his tarnished reputation, and, to his unspeakable joy and relief, he managed to make a good use of it.

Yes, there was no denying that life still had its good moments, and that, as his cousin had truly affirmed, a sportsman in sound health may contrive to set aside for a time all the troubles and sorrows that await his return to the outer world. It was, perhaps, a little humiliating that it should be so; yet so it undoubtedly was, and, after all, this brief period of quasi-oblivion was but a sort of parenthesis in his life, after which he would have to face cruel realities once more, like a sleeper whose night’s rest is over.

Of the outer world, and everything concerned therewith, Mr. Hamersley showed a marked reluctance to speak. ‘I’ll trouble you to observe the rules of the game,’ he said once, laughingly, in reply to some remark of Arthur’s. ‘We are playing at being as

free as air and thousands of miles away from all our belongings. If you try to destroy the illusion again you will tempt me to break your head.'

Arthur did not try to do so again, nor, indeed, were many opportunities for indiscretion granted to him. His cousin's notion of a holiday was, he found, hard physical labour from early dawn to sunset; and although a few days sufficed to rid him of superfluous flesh and bring his lungs and muscles into better trim, he had little breath to spare for conversation and little inclination for anything but sleep after the camp-fire had been kindled and the frugal evening meal disposed of. It was not every day that izardes came within range, or could even be seen from afar; nor was the restless leader of the expedition satisfied with making reconnaissances from his original point of departure. Never sparing himself, he never thought of sparing others, and it will be years before those porters of Gavarnie forget the calm, peremptory Englishman who marched them to and fro among the wild Arragonese valleys, without so much as consulting either them or the chief guide, from whom alone they had hitherto been in the habit of receiving orders. From time to time they grumbled a little under their breath, but they did not mutiny; they liked as well as feared their employer, and probably they all continued to hope that he might eventually succeed in bringing down one of the rare and shy bouquetins of which he was in search.

This, of course, was what Arthur also hoped for.



The ardour of the chase gained possession of him ; he ceased to think about anything else, ceased to take note of the passage of time : ceased, even, after he had killed four of them, to be thrown into an agony of nervousness by the sight of a herd of izards. Like his companion, he felt that the one thing which must be secured by hook or by crook, the one thing which would compensate for fatigue, exposure, disappointment and the misery of sleepless nights, when storms of wind and cold rain swept down from the mountains, extinguishing the fire and saturating the small store of dry wood, would be a single chance at a capra ibex. Only the chance, if ever it should come, could not be for him personally. It was well understood, though nothing had been actually said about it, that that must belong of right to Robert Hamersley, who, in truth, was not only the senior, but by far the better shot of the two men.

There are phases and manifestations of human nature which no student of the race can ever hope to explain — no, not even by examining unflinchingly into his own nature and judging of what he himself might conceivably be capable. Robert Hamersley was a man of whom little good could be said. Again and again in the course of his life he had proved himself to be cynically and uncompromisingly selfish. He did not, indeed, pretend to be anything else, and was wont to deride the idea of self-sacrifice as being in all cases either a folly or a fraud. Yet Arthur Foley is alive to testify to one most astounding

instance of magnanimity on his cousin's part, and it is not the magnificent pair of curved horns that adorn the entrance-hall at St. Ann's which will be required to keep him in mind of it until his dying day. At any given moment the whole scene comes before his eyes as vividly as at the time of its occurrence—the splendid muscular little beast, standing upon a shelf of rock, scarcely seventy yards away, with head erect, and huge knotted horns thrown back; his cousin's barely-audible injunction, against which he only dared to enter a mute protest; then the supreme instant when he fired, and the flood of remorseful anguish that overwhelmed him when the bouquetin bounded away across the snow and he knew for certain that he had missed.

But he had not missed. Mr. Hamersley assured him from the first that he had not; and although it was necessary to make a long detour before a blood-stained track upon the snow could be hit off and followed up, the quarry was at length discovered, stone-dead—a buck of twelve years, the old chasseur declared, counting the rings upon the horns, and a glory for ever to the fortunate sportsman who had secured him.

There were rejoicings in the camp that night, and by no one was Arthur more warmly congratulated than by his cousin, who refused to admit that the occasion was not one which called for extravagant expressions of gratitude.

‘I didn't want to go home without a bouquetin's

head, and I shouldn't have forgiven you if you had let that fellow escape,' said he; 'but as for shooting him myself—well, if you knew what a collection of heads and skins Ward is keeping for me until I can find some place to put them in, you would understand that I am not very eager to add to their number. Besides, we shall get another chance, I dare say. At least,' he added, with a sigh, 'I hope so; but there is no telling, because Pierre will be back from Gavarnie with the letters early to-morrow. I had to send him. Perhaps you don't realize that it is nearly three weeks since we left home.'

## CHAPTER XXI.

### LETTERS FROM HOME.

'If Pierre isn't here by eleven o'clock,' said Mr. Hamersley the next day, 'we'll give ourselves one more holiday, and let our correspondence wait until the evening. We may pot another izard or two, even if we're too late to get near the bouquetins.'

But, of course, Pierre hove in sight before the appointed hour. Does not the post always come in punctually, and do not trains invariably keep good time, when a little departure from regularity would be welcome? Through the field-glasses he could be seen trotting down the grassy slopes of the mountain barrier which separated two civilized beings from the rest of civilization, and as soon as it dawned upon him

that he was visible from the camp, he waved his hat and redoubled his pace with mistaken zeal. How was he to know that for one letter which brings good news to civilized men, there are sure to be a dozen the contents of which tend to shorten and embitter life? How was he to guess that he had done no sort of service to his employers by starting from Gavarnie long before dawn and putting his best leg foremost?

Presently he arrived, panting and perspiring, and cast his burden at their feet—an enormous collection of newspapers and letters, addressed to Mr. Hamersley, and only two for Arthur, who picked them up indifferently enough, and strolled away for a short distance to peruse them.

His father's missive was not particularly interesting. He learnt from it that Mr. Foley had been seeing very little of his neighbours, and was suffering from loneliness as well as anxiety. He was informed that Miss Meynell, who had declined an invitation to stay at Braunton Towers, had looked very pale and ill in church on the previous Sunday. Finally, he was implored to bear in mind the precautionary measures which had been urged upon him before his departure, and to come home as soon as he could. But the second letter, which was of a more recent date, which was written in a large, straggling hand, and worded in telegraphic style, made up what the first had lacked in exciting suggestiveness.

‘Well,’ it began, without preface, ‘how are our

spirits, and how is our temper? Sport pretty good? Temptation to commit suicide a little less strong? Write categorical replies, or, better still, come and deliver them in person. You will be received by an idiot, who has already set down such a full account of her idiocy on paper that she hasn't the energy to do it all over again. Apply for details to the commander-in-chief. Only don't stand too near him while you are questioning him, because he is apt to bite when irritated.—Yours,

‘LOLA.’

Now, there could not be much doubt as to the meaning of that, but there could be, and was, a great deal of doubt as to what step it behoved Lola's correspondent to take in the presence of such a communication. He glanced furtively and apprehensively at Mr. Hamersley, who had finished reading several sheets of notepaper, which he had allowed to drop from his fingers. He had placed his foot upon them to prevent the wind from blowing them away, and, with his elbows on his knees, was staring fixedly at vacancy. After a minute or two he rose, gathered up the sheets, which he stuffed into his pocket, and, leaving the remainder of his correspondence unopened, advanced towards the younger man.

‘You have heard from my daughter?’ he said, in a tone of cold interrogation.

‘Yes,’ answered Arthur hesitatingly, ‘I have had a—a few lines from her.’



‘To tell you, I suppose, that all is over between her and Lord Braunton?’

‘No; she doesn’t mention that.’

‘Oh? Well, so it is, or so she wishes me to believe.’ He paused for a moment, and then said: ‘We shall have to talk this over. What do you say to stretching our legs with a long walk? We can take our rifles if you like, though I don’t suppose we shall use them.’

Involuntarily Arthur thought of his father’s warnings. Under all the circumstances, might it not be just as well to leave the rifles behind? But he was ashamed of the absurd suspicion; and rather because he was ashamed of having entertained it even for an instant than because he thought that there was any likelihood of his obtaining a shot that day, he snatched up his weapon, answering: ‘Oh, let’s take them; there’s no harm in being prepared.’

Mr. Hamersley nodded assent, took his own rifle, and telling the men that they would not be wanted, began to mount the steep, shaly acclivity on the southern side of the valley with that long, easy stride of his which looked so deliberate, but which Arthur knew by woeful experience was a hard pace to keep up with. The nature of the ground obliged them to walk in single file, and it was never their custom to exchange unnecessary observations while on the march, so that the unbroken silence in which they proceeded to scale the heights for an hour or more was nothing out of the ordinary. Still, Arthur hoped that his

cousin did not mean to keep him in suspense much longer. He was reluctant to speak the first word; but since it was obvious that uncomfortable things would have to be said and uncomfortable confessions made by-and-by, he saw no particular reason for postponing the evil moment.

Mr. Hamersley supplied him with one when they had reached a ledge of sun-warmed rock, just beneath the snow-line, where there was room enough for them to sit down side by side. He seated himself, motioned to the young man to do likewise, and said :

‘I never like to speak to anyone in hot blood, if I can help it, and I have cooled down now. As you may imagine, I didn’t feel very cool for some time after I had finished my daughter’s letter.’

‘I don’t know what she may have told you.’

‘No. Well, I don’t know what she may have told you. Perhaps we had better make an exchange of documents. Yes, if you have no objection, I think that will be the shortest way.’

Arthur did not consider that he would be guilty of any breach of confidence by accepting this offer. Accordingly he handed over to Mr. Hamersley the short missive which has already been quoted, receiving in return a bulky epistle which he proceeded to read slowly and with mixed feelings. It was a queer composition—dashed off, evidently, with a lazy, contemptuous indifference to spelling and punctuation characteristic of the writer, and so interlarded with

French words and phrases that it could hardly be said to be an English composition at all. It was, however, perfectly intelligible—only too intelligible. Lola, after all, was not going to be Lady Braunton; she was going to be Mrs. Arthur Foley. The choice, she admitted, was a somewhat ridiculous one, and scarcely worthy of an enlightened young woman whose period of earthly existence had been allotted to her towards the close of the nineteenth century; still, she had made it, and her father would do well to resign himself to it. If he was angry and disgusted, *tant pis!* At his time of life he ought to know better than to get excited about affairs which were really no special concern of his. The long and the short of it was that she found herself quite unable to espouse Lord Braunton, who was too pedantic and matter-of-fact to be endured even in the humble capacity of a husband. It appeared, to be sure, from the evidently veracious account which she went on to give of her rupture with that despised nobleman, that it had been rather he than she who had cried off; but she seemed to look upon that as a very unimportant detail. Of course she could have married him if she had wanted to marry him, and there was no reason why she should not tell the truth about it.

‘You will remember that he behaved *en vrai grand seigneur* that afternoon when he caught us in full wrangle, and overheard some disagreeable home-truths. I was impressed, I was touched; if he had only gone on as he began, I should have accepted

him, *parole d'honneur!* But would you believe that he had the clumsiness to undo his own work by recurring to the subject? He was so kind as to assure me that he had no complaint to make; only, after what had reached his ears entirely against his will, he was forced to the conclusion that I did not love him. Naturally, I made haste to reply that one doesn't, as a rule, fall madly in love with a man whose one distinguishing feature is a pair of gleaming spectacles. He acknowledged that he was not precisely an Adonis, but wanted to know whether, if I became his wife, I would try to love him. I said that would depend a good deal upon himself, but that my dawning affection would probably be quenched if he pestered me with foolish questions. Instead of taking the hint, he went on questioning me, and finally screwed up his courage to the point of asking *à brûle-pourpoint* whether I loved anybody else. *Pour le coup c'était trop fort!* I lost patience; I answered him with the charming candour that you know of, and—he promptly withdrew all his pretensions. Upon the whole, I do not repent. I have no illusions. I am well aware that two or three years hence I shall be wondering how I could ever have been imbecile enough to throw away a magnificent fortune for the sake of a young man who will have ceased to adore me by that time, and who is doomed, like the rest of the world, to grow old and ugly; yet one has but one life, and even two short years of happiness are worth the sacrifice of all the other dull and colourless ones.

You may read that sentence to Arthur; it will both depress and elate him.'

She ought not to have been so certain that it would produce that effect. To tell the honest truth, Arthur was, just for an instant, elated by an avowal of which he could not doubt the sincerity; but his depression was more heartfelt and lasting. What was he to do? Obviously he must stick to his colours. He could not now say either to Lola or to her father that he had acted insanely, and that, although Rhoda Meynell was not for him, he could never give to another woman what she had professed to restore to him, but what he no longer possessed. No; the pleasing prospect sketched out for him by his future bride was what he must accept, and what, like her father, he would do well to accept with resignation. So there was only one reply for him to make when Mr. Hamersley's cool, well-modulated voice inquired whether he looked upon that letter as conclusive.

'As regards me, it is, of course, conclusive,' he answered. 'If you are annoyed or disappointed, I am sorry for it; but I can't draw back on that account.'

'In other words, you propose to marry my daughter with or without my consent?'

'I hope you will give your consent,' Arthur said.

'I wouldn't hope for that, if I were you. In the first place, Lola, as you may see for yourself by her letter, would lead you a dog's life; in the second place, my consent is not to be obtained upon any



terms. I will be open with you, Arthur; I will tell you exactly what I told her before leaving England. Personally, I like you very well, and I have liked you better since I have seen more of you; but no earthly consideration would induce me to let my daughter marry your father's son. I needn't go into particulars, or rake up an old story of which, I suppose, you have heard. I don't know that I am more vindictive than another; but this I know—your father shall not tread me under foot a second time. At the present moment he is desperately frightened of me. He has been more or less frightened of me all his life long, and I dare say that has been almost punishment enough. But if he thinks that he will end his days in peace and security by means of this clever scheme, he is very much mistaken in his man.'

'But he doesn't think so,' Arthur declared. 'It is you who are mistaken in imagining that he does. As a matter of fact, he doesn't wish for the match at all.'

'No doubt he would tell you that he didn't; but that is neither here nor there. The point to which I want to call your attention is, that I don't wish for the match, and that I won't have it. I have very seldom in my life failed to carry my point, and I should be glad to carry this one, if possible, without having recourse to strong measures.'

'But what is the use of saying that to me?' Arthur expostulated. 'I don't know what you mean by strong measures; but I suppose they will have to be used

against your daughter, if they are to be used at all. I am not disputing your authority over her; only I should have thought you would have been the first to admit that I can't run away and leave her in the lurch, unless she chooses to set me free.'

'To set you free! That is a queer sort of phrase for a lover to use. Well, never mind. I dare say I can guess what the true position of affairs is; though you may not be able to guess, and I don't care to state, why I prefer dealing directly with you to exercising my authority over Lola. I tell you that I forbid the banns, and that, if you please, must be final.'

Arthur shrugged his shoulders slightly.

'Oh, but I can't take that as final, you know,' he said.

'You had better.'

Arthur could only shrug his shoulders again, and a few minutes of silence followed. Then Mr. Hamersley resumed, in the same calm, measured tone that he had maintained all along:

'Just consider how you are situated. At the present moment your life is practically at the mercy of a man who has every reason for desiring to take it, who has no sentimental or religious scruples about what is called murder, who is at least a match for you in muscular strength, and who is a good deal more than a match for you in knowledge of how to use it. I will venture to say that you couldn't throw me down that precipice if you were to wrestle with

me for an hour, whereas I know that I could tip you over the edge, head first, after a struggle which would last no longer than I chose. Moreover, I could do that without the slightest risk of unpleasant consequences to myself, because there would be no witness of your death, and I should give my own account of the way in which you had met with it.'

Arthur was a little startled, but not at all frightened.

'You probably don't mean what you say,' he answered (although, truth to tell, he had involuntarily stiffened his muscles, and was ready to resist a sudden assault); 'but I may warn you that, if you were to succeed in killing me, the consequences to yourself might be more unpleasant than you think for. My father was persuaded that you had planned this expedition for the express purpose of making an attempt upon my life; and you may depend upon it that, if he couldn't get together sufficient evidence to hang you, he would establish a strong enough case to put an end to you from a social point of view.'

'He would be very welcome to try. Now, listen to me, my dear fellow. I not only don't want to kill you, but I should be very sorry to do you an injury of any sort or kind. All the same, I have a choice of evils before me, and I should prefer sending you out of this world to allowing you to remain in it with the prospect of eventually having to accept you as my son-in-law. I ask nothing more of you than that

you will give me your word of honour to withdraw. That you can easily do, upon the ground that you do not feel justified in defying me; and it is pretty clear that being "set free," as you call it, will not break your heart. To render your freedom more complete and unembarrassed, I will undertake, on my side, to remove my daughter from Bridstow immediately and permanently. Is it a bargain?

It was a bargain which might not, under other circumstances, have been wholly devoid of allurements; but under no circumstances, perhaps, could Arthur have closed with it, and certainly he could not do so in the face of a threat.

'I have told you already,' he replied, 'that I can only withdraw with Lola's consent. As for your trying to bully me into submission by a proposal to murder me in cold blood, I must say that I think that is rather melodramatic and silly. I don't for one moment believe that you were speaking seriously.'

Mr. Hamersley rose slowly and sighed.

'It is a curious thing,' he remarked, 'that one has only to state the truth in plain terms in order to make certain of being disbelieved. I have often had occasion to notice that before now.' He added, drawing a step nearer to the younger man: 'Just get up for one moment, will you? I will soon show you that I don't boast of what I can't perform.'

Arthur obeyed, still incredulous, yet realizing that it behoved him to be upon his guard. Instinctively,

and not very wisely, he picked up his rifle, thus leaving himself with only one arm free, and a couple of seconds later he found that he was to all intents and purposes helpless in the grip of an accomplished wrestler. The shelf of rock upon which the struggle took place was so narrow, and his power of resistance so slight, that the result was a foregone conclusion.

Arthur did not know whether his cousin meant to kill him or merely to frighten him; but he knew that he was being driven closer and closer to the brink; he felt that his feet were being forced from under him, and all of a sudden the cold terror of death clutched at his heart. With a supreme, desperate effort he threw himself backwards; Robert Hamersley staggered; then there was a blinding flash, a deafening report, and both men fell to the ground.

One of them rose, while the smoke cleared away; the other remained lying on his back as he had fallen, with arms outspread and staring eyeballs. By what means Arthur's rifle had discharged itself, and whether he could with any justice be held responsible for the unhappy fact that a bullet had penetrated Robert Hamersley's right breast, were questions which might become important in the future, but which were of little consequence in comparison with that which the horrified survivor hardly dared to put to himself. He dropped upon his knees, tore open the prostrate man's clothes with trembling



fingers, felt for his heart, bent his ear to the parted lips, and then ejaculated in an awe-struck whisper :

‘ Good God ! I have killed him ! ’

## CHAPTER XXII.

### FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

Just a week after the occurrence of the catastrophe described in the last chapter, Lola Hamersley reached Gavarnie, in response to a telegram from Arthur, which had told her no more than that her father had been accidentally shot through the body, but that his life, it was hoped, was not in immediate danger. Having travelled from England day and night, she was rather tired ; but she had slept a good deal on the journey, and looked far fresher and less anxious than the haggard young man who came out of the inn to meet her. She was shocked at the change in his appearance ; perhaps he, too, was a little shocked at the absence of change in hers. Certainly he was so by the first words that she spoke, after she had been informed (without having asked for information) that Mr. Hamersley was no worse.

‘ You look as if you yourself had been at the point of death ! ’ she exclaimed. ‘ One doesn’t look like that because one’s second cousin has had a bad accident. Of course it was you who shot him—I suspected that from the first. Not in a duel, surely ! In self-defence, then ? And yet I warned you that it might be dangerous to stand too close to him after he had

read my letter. I am certain it was just after he had read my letter that this happened. Wasn't it, now ?'

'It was a pure accident,' Arthur answered evasively. 'We had gone out for a walk together on the mountains, and my rifle went off—I can't tell you how or why. At first I thought that he was dead, and we none of us had the least hope of being able to carry him here alive; but somehow or other we did manage it. Luckily, our chief guide was an old soldier, who knew something about the treatment of wounds. Perhaps I ought to have telegraphed to you sooner; only there seemed to be so very little chance of your getting here in time, and then I wanted, if I could, to be able to tell you that the case wasn't desperate. So I decided to wait until the doctors had seen him. We have had two of them from Pau, and, as far as I can make out, they think now that he will pull through, although he can never have the use of his right lung again. But it is difficult to get a decisive opinion out of them; perhaps they don't really know. His vitality is so exceptional, they say, that, after having survived that interminable passage across the Breche de Roland, when we couldn't help shaking him cruelly, he may survive anything.'

Arthur spoke in a dull, mechanical voice, shuddering slightly at the recollection of what seemed to him to have been a prolonged and hideous nightmare—the almost insurmountable difficulty, which had, nevertheless, been surmounted, of carrying a heavy,

inert body over rocks and snow-slopes; the pitiless heat of the noonday sun; the insubordination of the porters, who had more than once threatened to lay down their burden; the groans, and every now and then the violent struggles, of the delirious sufferer; his own profound discouragement and helpless remorse. He had, it was true, done all that could have been done. Robert Hamersley, immediately after regaining consciousness, had hastened to exonerate him from all blame. The doctors and the two nurses who had been sent for were, or affected to be, sanguine. Yet, now that he was free to lie down and rest, the overpowering craving for sleep against which he had had to fight for forty-eight hours seemed to have left him; his nervous system was completely upset, and it was only with an effort that he could return intelligible replies to Lola's questions.

Those questions, with which she continued to ply him after they had entered the inn and had seated themselves in the bare little *salle-à-manger*, struck him as altogether extraordinary and inappropriate. What could it matter now whether he had been astonished or delighted or incredulous or anything else on receiving her letter? Why should she care to know what Mr. Hamersley had said or done after hearing that she had broken definitively with 'the impossible Braunton'? Why must she needs persist in inquiring what Mr. Foley and the Meynells thought of it all, when he had assured her again and again

that he had had no news from Bridstow for more than a week? Surely she could not realize that her father had been, and perhaps still was, in the very jaws of death!

‘Would you not like to see your father?’ he asked at length. ‘You will find him as weak as a baby and hardly able to speak; but he knows that you have been sent for.’

‘Oh, it will be nothing,’ she answered coolly; ‘*il en a vu bien d’autres!*’ We must move him to some less primitive place than this as soon as we can. Meanwhile, you seem to me to be almost as much in need of the doctor as he is. By the way, do you think there is a woman anywhere about the premises who could unpack my things for me? You might try to find one while I visit the invalid, and please tell her that I shall want a warm bath presently.’

Arthur departed on his errand with a vague impression that this surprising display of selfishness and indifference was assumed for the purpose of putting fresh spirit into him. It was not assumed; Lola’s chief merit—if, indeed, that be a merit—was that she almost always spoke and acted exactly as she felt. Yet she looked grave and a little awestruck when they met again, two hours later, and sat down to dine together.

‘He is very ill,’ she said; ‘I did not think it would be so bad. But he says he is not going to die, and the nurses declare that that is a good sign.’ She added presently: ‘He has been telling me how it all

happened. What a scene—and how strong you must be! Do you remember my saying to you once that I adored strength?’

‘I hope you haven’t been letting him talk too much,’ said Arthur, disregarding an allusion which jarred upon him painfully.

She jerked up her shoulders and made a grimace.

‘What would you have? He was determined to talk, and you know whether he is obstinate or not! It is not by shooting him through the lung that you will conquer his obstinacy, and I may tell you, if you don’t know it already, that he is still as obstinate as ever about you and me. Never while he lives will he let us have our own way; I believe it is even to prevent us from having our own way that he is bent upon living. I could not help admiring him; after all, it isn’t every day that one meets with so stubborn a man as that.’

‘I think,’ said Arthur quickly, ‘we ought not to appear to resist him just at present. It would be cruel—and dangerous too. He might fret himself into a fever again, lying on his back there and knowing that we were together. If it is necessary to tell him lies, let us tell lies and hope for absolution later on. The one important thing is that he should get well.’

Lola placed her elbows upon the table, rested her chin upon her folded hands, and surveyed her opposite neighbour with a calm and faintly contemptuous smile.



‘I don’t think I admire you quite as much as I do him,’ she remarked. ‘Why this excessive solicitude for the recovery of a man who tried to murder you?’

‘But he didn’t! He has assured me that he had no intention of the sort, and I quite believe him. He only wanted to show me that he could kill me if he chose.’

‘And what do you suppose that he wanted to show you that for? *Enfin!*—since there has been no tragedy, we will play any comedy you like. Only I must warn you that I am a poor actress, and if he is to be deceived, the less he sees of me the better.’

And, indeed, it was little enough that the sick man saw of his daughter during the week that followed. He had a bad night after his first interview with her, and the doctor who was in attendance peremptorily forbade any immediate repetition of it. Mademoiselle, this urbane little Frenchman said, must pardon him. He could well understand and sympathize with her anxiety to be of use; but the truth was that she could do her father no greater service, for the moment, than to keep out of his sight. It was essential that the patient should have absolute repose.

Mademoiselle obeyed orders with admirable docility. She was not in the least anxious to be of use; she was not in the least anxious about her father, who, she felt confident, would live to fight another day; and the atmosphere of the sick-room was distasteful

to her. The weather being fine and hot, notwithstanding the advanced season, she would have been very well satisfied to sit out of doors and gaze lazily at the snowy summits of the Cirque de Gavarnie, if only Arthur had been at hand to amuse her ; but Arthur also was for the present invisible, having been forced at last by violent headache and nervous exhaustion to take to his bed, and the consequence was that Miss Lola began to suffer from a serious attack of ennui. Was it for this that she had heroically spurned the substantial and durable benefits which must necessarily have accrued to her from an alliance with a wealthy peer of the realm ? Did Arthur Foley want to make her repent of her romantic impetuosity that he had not so much as a word of thanks to bestow upon her, and shut himself up in his bedroom for three days together without even sending her a message of apology ? She ended by sending a message to him, since he would send none to her, and when he appeared, in answer to her summons, looking pale, careworn and dejected, she did not hesitate to tell him that this sort of thing was really becoming intolerable.

‘I am very sorry,’ he said penitently, after she had expatiated for a short time upon her grievances ; ‘it must have been horribly dull for you, but I have been too seedy to be fit company for anybody. However, I am all right again now, and I don’t think you will be detained here much longer. In fact, the doctor says we must get your father down to Argeles somehow or

other. There will be a certain degree of risk in moving him ; but the risk of keeping him here, when the weather may break from one moment to another, would be still greater. So I expect we shall have to make a start in a day or two.'

She could not get him to speak to her otherwise than in this somewhat distantly polite tone. It was evident to her that her power over him was no longer what it had been, and although, after some persuasion, he did reiterate the vows which were her due, he seemed to think that nothing was of immediate consequence, save the physical condition of the man who was his declared enemy. This surprised and provoked her, if it did not shake her boundless faith in herself. For the time being it had even a salutary effect upon her spirits, since it forced her to make certain efforts, lest perchance she should lose what she had sacrificed so much in order to gain ; but she inwardly resolved that Arthur should pay dearly for his ungallant behaviour at a later date.

Meanwhile, he walked with her, talked to her, listened to her accounts of the final discomfiture of Lord Braunton, and expressed the gratitude for which she asked ; but his whole attention was taken up with making preparations for the transit to Argeles—which transit was successfully effected three days afterwards. Then another long week passed, during which the invalid showed daily symptoms of improvement, and then at length Lola, who had not been permitted to see him since the evening of her arrival

from England, was told that her father was asking for her. Arthur, who conveyed Mr. Hamersley's summons, impressed upon her that the interview ought not to last more than ten minutes, at the outside, and implored her to steer clear of agitating topics.

She rose from the camp-chair in the little garden adjoining the hotel, where she had been reclining, half asleep, and laughed.

'As if I could prevent him from introducing agitating topics,' she said.

'Well, but you can prevent him from agitating himself about them. Let him say what he likes—anything that he likes.'

'If I know him at all, he will do that without asking my permission,' answered Lola, and so swept into the house, leaving her suppliant far from reassured.

Robert Hamersley was lying in a darkened room, thinking his own thoughts, to which he was now about to give expression for the first time since the commencement of that long battle for life which he had maintained with characteristic doggedness and fortitude. His sufferings had at times been atrocious; but never, except when he had been swept out of consciousness by delirium, had a cry of pain or a murmur escaped him: he had husbanded his strength, well knowing that he would have need of it all, and the nurses spoke with tears in their eyes of his courage and patience. He had need of these too; for

the doctor had told him plainly that complete recovery was out of the question, and the prospect of eking out a maimed, precarious existence for a few more years was not so attractive a one to a man of his active habits that he would have been eager to grasp at it for its own sake. It was for Lola's sake and for the sake of Lola's future happiness that he was determined to live. That he should have arrived at the certitude that her happiness could only be secured by submission to his will may possibly have been due to some incipient failure of brain-power, to some confusion, the result of lifelong experience, between the ideas of personal defeat and hopeless disaster.

She advanced to his bedside, and, bending over him, kissed him on his forehead, after a momentary hesitation which he did not fail to notice. But, to be sure, he had never encouraged outward demonstrations of affection on her part, nor was it surprising that she should be a little nauseated by the close atmosphere and the smell of drugs and disinfectants. Something had, of course, to be said about his condition and his progress towards convalescence, and then in a few words (for it was indispensable that words should be economized) he told her why he had sent for her. He wished her to dismiss Arthur Foley without further delay.

‘Don't be rough or rude with him—there is no need for that—but just make him understand that the time has come for him to leave us. I hear that you and he dine together every day, and if he were to stay



any longer people might say that you were engaged to be married to him.'

'But that is just what I am,' observed Lola calmly, 'so people would be right for once.'

A brief but warm altercation followed this declaration of hostilities. To do Lola justice, she tried to temporize and to spare her father, whose emaciated aspect and laboured utterances had startled her, if they had not touched her heart; but he would not be diverted from his point. Unconditional surrender was what he insisted upon, and since she did not intend to surrender, she had no alternative but to tell him so. It must have been a bitter pill to him to be driven, as he eventually was, to have recourse to entreaties.

'Lola,' he whispered, 'have you no love or pity at all for me? Can't you sacrifice one of your whims—for I know very well that it is only a whim—to please me? Ask for anything else in the world that you like; but don't ask me to consent to your marriage with that man's son!'

'I have not asked for your consent,' she returned coldly; 'at a pinch I could dispense with it. As for pity, I am sorry to see you suffering; but you can't order love and self-sacrifice when you want them, as you would order a new suit of clothes. I am what I am, and what you have made me. Whim for whim, mine has as good a right to be gratified as yours.'

He murmured something unintelligible, stretching out his thin hands to her and gazing up at her with beseeching sunken eyes; but she was not moved.

'*Allons !*' she resumed ; ' you must resign yourself to the inevitable. I have nothing to reproach myself with ; I have been a good daughter to you, as daughters go, and I have given you very little trouble ; but I prefer pleasing myself to pleasing you. What else could you expect ?'

The white-capped nurse opened the door softly and looked in. Miss Hamersley perceiving that she had exceeded her time, beckoned to the attendant, nodded to her father and retired, without repeating the kiss which, perhaps, he had as little right to expect from her as love or self-sacrifice or submission.

He lay passive and motionless, while the nurse felt his pulse, took his temperature, shook her head, and poured out a glass of medicine for him. For the first time in his life he had been beaten in the open field ; he had no more illusions, nor any more hopes. Reverses he had met with often and often, and had gloried in them as a powerful swimmer glories in battling with the waves that threaten to overwhelm him ; but never until now had he been made acquainted with despair. It was not the actual point upon which he had been defeated that deprived him of all wish to live—in the long-run he might possibly have brought himself to assent to the triumph of the Foleys—but what he could not endure was the thought that his daughter, the only human being whom he loved, neither feared nor cared for him. It was his own fault, or her fault, or nobody's fault—questions of blame or praise signified nothing, now

that it was too late to mould events or to 'pierce Fate's impenetrable ear.' What was certain was that there was no longer any use or place for Robert Hamersley in this world. And was he to die by inches, looking on helplessly while his will was set at naught, longing in his weakness for an occasional kind word, which would probably be flung to him when it did not chance to be forgotten, dependent upon hirelings to relieve the constant demands of his wrecked, suffering body? Such was not the prospect likely to be submitted to by a man who had never lacked courage, and who neither believed in nor desired a future state of existence.

He lay for some little time staring at a streak of sunlight upon the white wall, and watched it growing narrower and narrower as the sun sank. Then he made a sign to the nurse, and begged her to leave him. He wanted nothing, he said; he was going to sleep, and she was to be sure not to disturb him until she had had her evening meal. As soon as he was alone he hastily tore away the bandages and dressings from his wound, and probably the last thing of which he was aware was a feeling of surprise at his inability to repress a short, sharp cry. In the fit of spasmodic coughing which filled his mouth with blood he lost consciousness, and so took leave for ever of a world which, it may be, had treated him no worse than he had deserved.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

## DARK DAYS.

MR. FOLEY had, of course, been apprised of the so-called accident which had befallen his enemy, and had likewise been briefly informed of his son's engagement to Lola Hamersley. Neither item of intelligence had found him wholly unprepared, though the latter had been very much more unwelcome to him than the former. That an encounter of some sort would be forced upon his son in those mountain solitudes he had felt so sure that it had been a positive relief to hear of Robert Hamersley's serious wound. It had been inflicted, no doubt, in self-defence, and since a fatal termination did not seem to be apprehended, neither sympathy nor anxiety was called for on behalf of the aggressor. But this sudden and unforeseen matrimonial engagement was of a nature to arouse both sentiments, and Mr. Foley wrote two long letters to Arthur, adjuring him not to let quixotic notions of honourable behaviour ruin his whole future life.

The replies which he received were short and far from satisfactory. Arthur evidently thought that the time for argument and good advice had gone by; and the worst of it was that Arthur was probably in the right. For Mrs. Latimer had learnt, upon the best authority, that Lord Branton was once more paying his addresses to Rhoda Meynell, while Lady

Braunton stopped her carriage in Bridstow one afternoon, in order to beckon to Mr. Foley and tell him how rejoiced she had been to hear that poetical justice was going to be done at last in a most poetical and romantic way.

‘Nothing,’ she declared radiantly, ‘could be more like the last chapter of a three-volume novel. St. Ann’s goes to the children of the two men who couldn’t have divided the placé between them; Mr. Hamersley gets well in time to make a suitable speech at the wedding-breakfast, and complications which looked formidable a little while ago are comfortably smoothed away. I am sure you know that I don’t say it to put you out of conceit with your future daughter-in-law, but, between ourselves, I don’t grudge her to you. Poor dear Braunton was never created to be the husband of a wife who is—well, not exactly domestic in her habits.’

Perhaps, thought Mr. Foley, poor dear Arthur had not been created for that purpose either; still, there was nothing for it but to smile pleasantly and trust that Providence might intervene at the eleventh hour to mar the symmetry of Lady Braunton’s programme. In one particular, at all events, it must fall short of fulfilment, as he was shocked to learn by the following telegram from Arthur, which he found upon his table when he returned home.

‘Robert Hamersley died last night. Do not know what step to take. Please come here immediately if you can.’



Mr. Foley despatched a prompt reply, and, stepping out of the train which landed him at Argeles forty-eight hours later, was met by his son, the sight of whose dull eyes and hollow cheeks fairly horrified him.

‘My dear boy,’ he exclaimed, ‘you look like a ghost! You mustn’t take this so terribly to heart, though I don’t wonder at your being upset. How did it happen?’

Arthur told him how it had happened while they walked slowly up through the village to the hotel, a cynosure for the eyes of the loitering peasants, many of whom had witnessed the funeral procession of the ill-fated English sportsman on the previous day. It had been impossible to delay the funeral, Arthur explained; the landlord and the local authorities had refused to hear of any postponement. Fortunately, the English chaplain who was stationed at Argeles during the summer months had not yet left, and, not less fortunately, he had omitted to make inquiry as to the dead man’s religious opinions.

‘And there were no—difficulties as to the cause of death?’ asked Mr. Foley.

‘Oh no; the doctor took all responsibility. He was supposed to have torn his wound open in a sudden access of delirium. Perhaps it really was so; nobody can tell for certain. He was still alive when they went into his room, but he never recovered consciousness.’

‘And Lola—how is she bearing it?’

Arthur did not answer for a moment, and then said rather dryly :

‘She seems to me to be bearing it very well ; but you will see her presently, and be able to judge for yourself.’

That Lola was absolutely devoid of sensibilities and emotions which are common to ninety-nine out of every hundred human beings is not very probable ; but she certainly chose to behave as though such were her exceptional temperament, and if neither Arthur nor Mr. Foley could find any excuse for her, excuses may, nevertheless, have been discoverable. In his misery and remorse Arthur charged her with having killed her father ; then he had accused himself of being a murderer, which, as she pointed out to him, was inconsistent, adding that, in any case, he ought to be the last to reproach her, since it was for his sake that she had spoken and acted as she had done. Then unseemly recriminations had been exchanged, which had resulted in a mutual agreement that the topic should never again be touched upon between them. Possibly the cool, unconcerned manner which shocked Mr. Foley and revolted Arthur may have been a cloak for feelings which Lola did not care to exhibit in the presence of those who would hardly have understood their mixed nature. But it cannot be said that she had loved her father, or that his death caused her any deep sorrow.

The question which appeared to preoccupy her

chiefly, and which she lost no time in bringing under Mr. Foley's notice, was—what was to be done next?

It was a somewhat puzzling question ; for the girl could not be left quite unprotected, and her nearest relations were in South America. Her nearest relation in Europe was no other than Mr. Foley, who drew down the corners of his mouth when he realized that uncomfortable fact, and the responsibilities cast upon him thereby. The one thing which he was quite sure that he did not want to do was the one which she very calmly and composedly suggested.

‘Oh dear no! I couldn't think of it,’ was his decisive reply. ‘My first duty will be to ascertain whether your poor father has left any will, and what your financial position is. After that, I suppose, some account will have to be taken of his wishes. In any case considerations of common decency must entail the postponement of your marriage for several months. Upon the whole, I believe the best plan will be for us all to go to Paris, where I think I have heard you say that you have friends, and from thence I can run over to London, see the lawyers, and make such arrangements as may be necessary. I presume that neither you nor Arthur would wish to return to Bridstow for the present?’

‘Paris will suit me a great deal better than Bridstow, thank you,’ answered Lola, smiling. ‘I still think you would have saved yourself trouble if you would consent to our being married forthwith ; but let us by all means respect the *convenances* if you prefer to do

so. I am not sure that it is altogether *convenable* for me to reside under the same roof with my *fiancé*; but it is not for me to make difficulties. *Va pour Paris !*

She evidently enjoyed shocking her future father-in-law. Probably she also saw through him, and was aware that he had not yet abandoned all hope of averting an alliance which was not to his taste. But it could not now be averted; Arthur fully understood that, although the spells of the enchantress had lost all their potency for him, and although her callousness and selfishness lay bare before his eyes. He had told her that he loved her. For his sake she had rejected Lord Braunton and defied paternal authority. She was homeless and friendless. It was no longer possible for a man who wished to respect himself as much as he could to leave her in the lurch. At best, the measure of self-respect to which he could hope to attain must be infinitesimal.

So it came to pass that, when the days were shortening rapidly, and autumn frosts were beginning to give a forecast of winter, this ill-assorted trio took possession of an apartment in the Boulevard Malesherbes, which Mr. Foley had secured on moderate terms from a family of Americans who had been ordered South. As the result of several journeys to London on Mr. Foley's part, it had transpired that, Robert Hamersley having died intestate, the extremely modest fortune which he had left would go by law to his only child. It had likewise been urged by Arthur,

and reluctantly admitted by his father, that the late Mr. Hamersley's objections or prejudices could have no more weight than his only child might be pleased to assign to them; and it had, therefore, been arranged that a quiet wedding ceremony should be solemnized in Paris soon after Christmas. What was to happen after that was neither decided nor discussed.

Those days were without doubt the most miserable that Arthur had ever known; yet it was no aggravation of their misery that they were spent for the most part in solitude. He was not at all sorry that his father, who had numerous Parisian acquaintances, and who may have shrunk as much as he did from any occasion for talking over an irremediable situation, was out almost all day long, and he was very glad that Lola had foregathered with a former school-fellow, a certain young Vicomtesse de Chaulnes, who monopolized her from morning to night. He showered blessings upon the head of that lively and friendly little Madame de Chaulnes; for was it not she who had relieved him of a task well-nigh too hard for his powers—that of playing the ardent lover's part?

Lola, to be sure, did not appear to resent his gloomy taciturnity and abstraction. She chose to assume that, for some reason or other, he was out of temper, and would shrug her shoulders, saying:

‘When you are tired of being in the sulks, let me know. I am amusing myself pretty well without



you, but I shall be charmed to amuse myself with you as soon as you like.'

It was in the month of December that, matters of business compelling Mr. Foley to cross over to England and absent himself for a week, Madame de Chaulnes came forward, like a true goddess out of a machine, with a request that Lola might be consigned to her care pending the return of the *de facto* guardian, who, indeed, had been debating in some perplexity what was to be done with his ward. The offer was, of course, gratefully accepted, and thus Arthur was left with only his melancholy musings to keep him company. He profited by the opportunity to form a few sensible resolutions. It was high time for him, he felt, to respond to Lola's graciously worded invitation, and to come out of the sulks. She had borne with him patiently enough so far; but he could not count upon any continuance of her present leniency, nor, since she was going to be his wife, was it wise to repel her as he had been doing of late. The outlook was not exhilarating; but he would scarcely make it more so by gazing at it with a sour countenance, and, after all, one ends by becoming accustomed to everything. Only he hoped and trusted she would not want to live at St. Ann's. In all probability she would not; in all probability she would prefer some foreign city, where there would be no hunting, no shooting, no cricket—nothing to lend a poor man a hand towards resignation and oblivion.

It was by such highly skilful and efficacious methods

that Arthur was striving to promote a flow of cheerfulness in his breast when he entered the deserted *appartement* of the Boulevard Malesherbes one evening between five and six o'clock. To his surprise, and not altogether to his satisfaction, he found it less deserted than it had been when he had left it early in the day; for bending over the crackling wood-fire by which alone the salon was lighted, was the graceful female figure that was destined to be for the future the chief ornament of his own domestic hearth.

'Lola!' he exclaimed. And then, thinking that she might perhaps have mistaken the day of the month: 'The governor doesn't come back until to-morrow, you know.'

'Don't be alarmed,' she answered, 'I have only come to pay you a short visit. Marie de Chaulnes was scandalized, but she doesn't know how I hate writing letters, and really, when one has something to say that can be said in half a dozen words, why should one weary one's self to death for an hour by putting it down on paper?'

'You have something to say to me?'

'I have. And you will be so delighted to hear it that I won't be cruel enough to keep you on the tip-toe of expectation. It is only that I am going to be married, as soon as the requisite formalities have been gone through, to a certain Mr. Webster, of whom I have seen a good deal at the De Chaulnes' lately. He is an American millionaire, not very young and

not very old, rather Frenchified, and, as Marie says, *très bien*. Upon the whole, I think he will suit me, and he thinks that I shall suit him. One can but hope that he will not find himself mistaken.'

'And you did not think it necessary to consult me before disposing of your future in this way!'

'Not in the least, my dear Arthur. I knew that I might count upon your cordial assent. For the rest, Mr. Webster has been told everything, and has been charmingly complaisant. He piques himself upon being *bien-élevé*—which is a harmless foible, and one which I might recommend you to imitate if I were inclined to say disagreeable things. But I don't wish to be disagreeable, I only wish to congratulate you, and at the same time to inform you that you need not trouble yourself any further about me. Marie de Chaulnes has kindly offered to give me house-room until the day of my wedding.'

Arthur hardly knew what reply to make. He could not affect to be angry or dismayed. He was by no means sure that he ought not to profess a contrition which, in truth, would not have been wholly insincere. At length he could think of nothing better to say than :

'I don't feel that I have any right to oppose you.'

'Don't you really?' she rejoined, rising and drawing her fur cloak over her shoulders. 'How very accommodating of you! But, then, I was sure that you would be accommodating. Farewell, then, my dear cousin, and let me tell you for your comfort, as a last

word, that your conduct ever since we left the Pyrenees has completely cured me of the little weakness that you know of—the first and last folly of my life ! I shall always retain a pleasant memory of it and you, and language can't express the gratitude that I feel to you for having preserved me from consequences which looked inevitable only a short time ago. Some day, perhaps, you will also feel grateful to me for having preserved you from the little Sunday-school miss. My love to your father, who will join in your transports of joy when he hears the news. If he wants to see me about matters of business he knows my address.'

So that was the last of Lola Hamersley, who, as Mrs. Webster, has since acquired well-deserved celebrity in a social sphere far above that in which the Arthur Foleys of this world move. It has been pretended by some atrabilious persons that millionaires are a useless class, and ought to be summarily abolished ; but the truth, probably, is that there is a mission for all created beings, and that poor little gray-headed, correct-mannered exile Mr. Webster may surely be considered to have fulfilled his. Would it not be an immense consolation to all of us to reflect upon our death-beds that we had made a single fellow-creature happy ? Mr. Webster, when his time comes, will be able to take that consolation to himself, and may even be provided with a couple of extra strings to his bow. Mr. Foley, at all events, when he reached Paris and heard what had taken place during his

absence, justified Lola's prediction to the fullest extent.

'My dear boy,' he exclaimed, 'this is better news than I ever in my most extravagant imaginings dared to hope for! You might have jilted her, and, for my own part, I think you would have been entitled to do so; but it is infinitely more satisfactory that she should have jilted you. This almost makes amends for all one's disappointments and disillusiones, and for the total failure that one has made of one's attempt to reside in one's native land.'

Arthur, who knew that his father had been at St. Ann's, said:

'I suppose Lord Braunton's engagement to Miss Meynell is announced?'

'Not yet, I believe; but I am afraid, from what I heard, that it will be announced shortly. I am very sorry for it; and yet——'

Arthur interrupted him with a deprecating gesture.

'For goodness' sake, don't look as if you thought me so insane as to have cherished the faintest shadow of a hope! I have proved myself to be insane enough for anything, I admit; but I am not quite so mad as that. Besides, I may have been shaken back into my senses. Anyhow, I am free again, thank God! And I must try to make a reasonable use of my freedom.'

Then he went on to state in what manner he proposed, after having considered his position for a day and a night, to utilize that boon. Amongst the



very few Englishmen with whom he had latterly scraped acquaintance there was a certain young man who owned a tea plantation in Ceylon, whither he was about to return after a brief holiday.

‘And I know,’ said Arthur, ‘he would be only too glad to take me with him, because he wants a companion and doesn’t care about having a partner. Of course I shouldn’t expect to make money out of it; but he tells me that in a couple of years or so a man learns enough to be able to start on his own account, if he feels inclined, and in the meantime I should, at least, have an occupation. I must do something; you’ll allow that, now that the St. Ann’s experiment has, as you say, turned out a total failure. I can’t loaf about the Continent, with my arms hanging by my sides!’

Mr. Foley remained silent for a few moments before answering.

‘I agree with you that absolute inaction is impossible, and that St. Ann’s, under existing circumstances, is impossible also; but—Ceylon is a long way off. And two years is a longish time at my age, Arthur,’ he added rather wistfully.

‘But it isn’t as if you would miss me. It isn’t as if we had ever been indispensable to one another,’ the young man urged with unconscious cruelty. ‘You will lead the life you enjoy, wandering about Italy and France, and seeing your old friends, and painting. For that matter, I don’t see why you shouldn’t pay me a visit in Ceylon, which really isn’t such a very

long way off, and where, I believe, you would find any number of subjects for pictures.'

'I don't think I will go to Ceylon,' answered Mr. Foley, smiling, 'but perhaps it may not be necessary for you to stay two whole years there without a break. Oh, it is necessary for you to go there, or somewhere; I see that, and I don't grumble. I should have been worse off if you had married Lola Hamersley, and, what is more to the purpose, you would have been worse off too. Things haven't gone quite as smoothly with us as they might have done; but, on the other hand, they have gone less crookedly than they promised to do a week ago. After all, one generally finds—at least, I have generally found—that one has to be contented with a *pis aller*.'

Arthur's careworn face brightened. He had anticipated far more strenuous opposition, and he was not ungrateful to his father for having yielded almost without demur. But he did not know, nor perhaps was he greatly to blame for not knowing, how much his father had been called upon to resign.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### DAWN.

WHILE fully five-sixths of the inhabitants of Great Britain were shivering under the low, gray skies of mid-winter, Bridstow still continued to bask in a brief daily allowance of sunshine. The evergreen trees

and shrubs which flourish in that mild, moist climate lent to the neighbourhood a certain false air of perpetual summer. The nipping east winds which would fall due later had not yet made themselves felt. The sea was almost as blue as the Mediterranean, and only a spectator accustomed to take note of such things would have observed that the little fishing fleet in the offing had winter canvas set.

Arthur Foley, as he stood on the terrace at St. Ann's, shading his eyes with his hand, could not help feeling that he had a goodly heritage. No doubt he appreciated it the more because he felt so sure that it could never be his, save at some remote future date, and in a pecuniary sense alone. Oh no; he could never live at St. Ann's again. The chances were—although he had not liked to say this to his father—that the remainder of his life would be spent in Ceylon. And, indeed, it was rather for the sake of taking one last look at a place which, when all was said and done, must always be associated with some happy memories in his mind, than in order to collect a few belongings of his, that he had run over from Paris for a couple of nights preparatory to setting forth on his voyage. He had not come in the hope of seeing anybody in particular, nor even of hearing anything in particular; still, since he was upon the spot, it was natural enough that he should endeavour to discover from the servants whether any event of local importance had occurred lately, and very provoking to find that they could not, or would not,

tell him more than that Braunton Towers was shut up, the family having, as usual at that season of the year, left home. It was impossible to ask them point-blank the question to which he longed to have an answer. And, after all, what did it matter? If Rhoda was not going to marry Lord Braunton, she would, sooner or later, marry someone else. There was no real reason for rejoicing because his lordship had apparently left home an untrammelled bachelor.

Nevertheless, just as a man who knows that he has an incurable disease wishes to ascertain, if possible, how soon it will kill him, Arthur wanted to hear the truth; and on the following afternoon he strolled down to the town, thinking to himself that it would be bad luck if he did not happen upon Mr. or Mrs. Latimer in the course of his walk. But Mr. Latimer, as it chanced, was attending a ruri-decanal meeting that day, while his spouse (who would have been inconsolable had she known what a fine opportunity she had missed of making full inquiries as to the mysterious death of the late Mr. Hamersley) had profited by the fine weather to visit an outlying district of the parish. However, Arthur ended by discovering his old friend Jacob Luscombe, sitting sideways on the parapet above the harbour, with his hands in his pockets and a short black pipe in his mouth; and Jacob, who was very pleased to see him, remarked at once that it was a nice day for a sail on the water.

‘First-rate,’ Arthur agreed; ‘but I’m afraid I

haven't time to take a boat this afternoon. I have only come down here to pack up a few things, and to-morrow I'm off for Ceylon, if you know where that is?'

'Know where 'tis!' echoed Jacob, slightly affronted. 'Well, there ain't a many ports as you could name in any quarter o' the globe but what I've touched at 'em in my young days, sir. Lor' bless you! I seen Colombo and Galle more often nor I wanted to—ah, and Trincomalee, too, where I come near my death through too much fresh fruit and a tarrible turn o' gripes. Drat they blazin' tropics, says I! What be gwine to do out to Ceylon, then, sir?'

Arthur, not caring to enter into details, replied vaguely that a man couldn't stay at home all his days; to which Jacob rejoined with a grunt that, by his way of thinking, a man might do worse. He added that it was a sin and a shame for the gentry to close their houses and rush about the world as they did nowadays.

'Ah, if they was all like Colonel Meynell, now! But there 'tis, you see, sir; the Colonel, as is what you might call a pore man, stops at home and does what he can for his neighbours, while Lord Braunton—but there! I don't want to say nowt agin' his lordship, for he's free with his money, I'll allow.'

This gave Arthur an opportunity for insinuating a few adroit queries respecting Lord Braunton, the result of which was to convince him that, if the lord of the manor contemplated a matrimonial alliance,



Jacob Luscombe knew nothing of it. Then he went on to inquire after Colonel Meynell, who, he hoped, was quite well.

‘What! Ain’t ’ee seen un?’ Jacob asked in surprise. ‘Why, he was here not an hour ago. You’ll find un up to the Men’s Readin’ Room, sir, for sartain. This time o’ year he’s there most evenin’s till six o’clock, or maybe later.’

Now, if there was one thing of which Arthur was more sure than another, it was that he did not wish to see Colonel Meynell; yet, after he had said good-bye to Jacob Luscombe, and had provided that ancient mariner with the means of drinking his health, he wandered up through the narrow streets of the town, instead of turning to the left and making straight for home. It was growing dark by this time, and the red lamp above the door of the Men’s Reading Room had already been lighted. Arthur stood for awhile, gazing up at the windows of a building which he had no thought of entering, but with the interior of which he had been tolerably familiar in happier days. Meynell was in there, no doubt, chatting with his disciples, seeking out books and magazines suitable to their several requirements, knowing exactly what to say to each of them. Ah, lucky fellow! What more can a man ask for in this bewildering world than to be provided with a creed in which he implicitly believes; to be beloved, respected, useful, always busy, never in doubt as to the wisdom or folly of his own actions? In order to

be so lucky as that, it is, perhaps, necessary to possess the additional advantages of limited sensibility and limited intelligence; but what then? To increase knowledge is to increase sorrow; and how dieth the wise man?—as the fool.

Arthur Foley, at any rate, could not flatter himself that his personal sorrows had been due to any excess of knowledge on his part, nor could he think that he was acting very wisely in remaining out there in the street with a half-acknowledged hope of bidding farewell to the man who had unquestionably been instrumental in blighting his life for him. But he remained all the same, and after a time the Colonel emerged, glanced to right and left in his usual quick, alert fashion, caught sight of the loiterer, and started. The mutual greetings which followed were, of necessity, somewhat cold and constrained. Arthur made haste to mention that he was leaving on the morrow, and was about to add some further communications, when the Colonel interrupted him by saying:

‘You are going to be married, I hear. I suppose I ought to congratulate you.’

‘No,’ answered the other; ‘but you may congratulate me, if you like, upon the rupture of my engagement to my cousin, Lola Hamersley, who is going to marry somebody else. I should like to tell you all about it, because you are sure to hear all sorts of untrue stories; and it’s quite upon the cards that we may never meet again, you and I.’

So, Colonel Meynell having responded by a vague

gesture which might have been interpreted as signifying assent, he proceeded to relate his story, endeavouring to do so without undue clemency or severity towards himself or others, and without laying more stress than he could help upon the circumstance that he would never have gone so far astray had not all hope of ever winning the girl whom he loved been refused to him. And when he had finished, Colonel Meynell only observed :

‘I am glad you are going out to Ceylon.’

‘Oh, so am I, of course,’ answered Arthur, a little hurt by that unsympathetic comment upon so long and tragic a narrative. ‘I couldn’t have returned here, and I couldn’t have dawdled about foreign towns with nothing on earth to do. Even the governor admitted that.’ After a momentary pause, he added : ‘I wonder whether you would mind telling me if it is true that your sister is engaged to Braunton?’

‘She is not engaged to him,’ replied the Colonel abruptly. And then : ‘I don’t care to conceal anything from you. He did propose to her, and it was on your account that she refused him, although she thought at the time, as we all did, that you were about to marry Miss Hamersley. When she hears what I shall feel bound to repeat to her this evening, she will naturally be confirmed in—well, in what I dare say you will pardon me for calling an unfortunate attachment. That is one reason why I am glad that you are going to Ceylon. Oh, you are going, my dear fellow ; pray make no mistake about that.’

‘I don’t make any mistake,’ Arthur protested. ‘Certainly I must go; and certainly I never had the faintest hope or expectation of being forgiven. But—but this does make a difference; doesn’t it? May I not see her, just for a few minutes, to say good-bye?’

‘No, Foley, you may not; nor shall any correspondence pass between you while you are absent. I can’t prevent your writing, it is true; but I can answer for it that she will neither acknowledge your letters nor even open them. You may depend upon it that she will obey me in the future, just as she has done in the past.’

There was a short pause; after which Arthur said hesitatingly: ‘Don’t you think you are rather hard upon us both?’

‘Yes; but not so hard as you have been upon my sister, and not more hard than is necessary. Why, man, if I had no great confidence in you from the first, what confidence do you imagine I am likely to feel in you now? You don’t seem to know what you would be at for a week at a time. If you can’t have what you want immediately, you must needs rush off like a madman, and clamour for something which you say you don’t want! By your own showing, it was your cousin who threw you over, not you who forsook her; and how do I know what sirens you may not meet in Ceylon or on board ship? You talk about not expecting to be forgiven; but it isn’t a question of forgiveness. Rhoda, I have no doubt, will forgive you, only——’

'Only you won't.'

'I have nothing to forgive. You have committed no offence against me. All I say is that I didn't consider you a safe man to entrust my sister to in the first instance; and you can hardly wonder at my considering you still less safe after what has happened.'

'Oh, I don't wonder in the least; although what has happened—poor Robert Hamersley's death, and then those dreadful weeks when I thought it was as certain as anything could be that I should be tied for life to a woman whom I almost hated—all that may have changed me a little, and made me what you would call safer. I shall never again be such an idiot as I have been. But I suppose you won't believe that.'

For the first time Colonel Meynell's features relaxed into a smile.

'I don't want to insult you,' he answered; 'but it seems to me that I myself should be an unmitigated idiot if I were to take your word for it. I really must insist upon proofs. You are going to Ceylon for two years, you say. Go, then; and if, at the expiration of two years, you choose to come back, with some sort of a decent record to show for yourself, I shall not feel inclined to stand in your way any longer. Stop a moment! I am not at the end of my "ifs" yet. Two years is a long time, and I will no more answer for it that Rhoda will be in the same mind two years hence than I would answer for you. I answer for nothing and nobody, except myself.'

But in the first flush of his joy and gratitude



Arthur asked for nothing more. It was enough, and more than enough, to know that he had now a definite hope, a definite assurance, upon which he could implicitly rely, and in return for which two years of exile seemed a trifling price to pay. Presently, however, he began to put forward diffident demands, in obedience to the universal law of progress, which forbids us to rest satisfied with having been granted an inch when an ell is what we want. In this way he extorted a promise from his reluctant friend that he should not be left in entire ignorance of Bridstow news, and that occasional letters addressed to Colonel Meynell, Moor Cottage, should be duly acknowledged; only against his reiterated plea for one brief parting interview with Rhoda the Colonel held out stoutly.

‘I can’t allow it, my good fellow, and you ought to see why I can’t. If you and she were to meet now, you would hardly be able to help saying things which you might afterwards regret; and I am determined to preserve Rhoda from the risk of committing herself. At present, as I hope you understand, she is not committed in any way.’

‘Of course she is not,’ agreed Arthur, ‘and I shouldn’t dream of asking her to commit herself; but surely no great harm would be done by my just telling her——’

‘Oh, I’ll tell her; I can’t help telling her—though, honestly speaking, I wish I could. Well, I haven’t talked much like a friend to you, Foley, and I can’t feel quite as friendly towards you as perhaps I ought;

but at least you may trust me to be loyal. Do your part and I'll do mine ; that's all I can say.'

Upon the whole, Arthur could not but admit, as he turned away, after parting with the inflexible Colonel, that his sentence was a merciful one. It was hard to be dismissed without having been permitted to offer any explanation to Rhoda ; yet even if that permission had been accorded him, he could hardly have hoped to make her understand what still remained incomprehensible to himself. To understand is to forgive ; but it is possible, fortunately, to forgive without understanding, and her brother had said that she would, no doubt, forgive him. It only remained for him to show that he was in some degree worthy of her clemency, and to await as patiently as might be the end of his long period of probation.

Nevertheless, he was not to quit his native land without a parting word of encouragement from a quarter whence he had ceased to expect anything so improbable. Driving down to the station on the following morning, his heart suddenly rose into his mouth when a bend of the road brought him within sight of a slim figure which he would have recognised among a thousand, and almost before he knew what he was about he pulled up, threw the reins to the groom, and jumped out.

'I was waiting for you,' Rhoda said a little breathlessly. 'I told Victor I must see you for a moment, and he gave me leave. I only wanted to tell you that I have not changed, and that, although I must not write to you, I shall never change. I feel as if all

that has happened had been my fault, and that I might have prevented it if I had only said this sooner. I have never differed from Victor before; but I differ from him now, and I had to say so. He is so simple and steadfast himself that he doesn't realize——'

'How miserably weak and stupid other men can be?' interrupted Arthur. He was holding Rhoda's hand; he was gazing imploringly into her clear eyes, and, truth to tell, he was painfully conscious of the embarrassing scrutiny of the groom. 'I won't go!' he exclaimed suddenly. 'I can't go like this! There's no reason why I shouldn't take the night mail, and——'

'Oh, but you must go,' she returned, withdrawing her hand, 'and you have no time to lose. I have said what I wanted to say, and I know quite well all that you want to say. Don't trouble about it; it doesn't trouble me. I can't deny that I have been unhappy; but I was sure, all the time, that you did not really care for her. Besides, I brought it upon myself. I mean to put it utterly away from my mind, and so must you. Now go; and in two years' time you will find me here, waiting for you.'

She sprang back from the road, and was on the top of one of the high banks which bordered it before he could draw breath. Possibly she also may have remembered the groom, and may have been anxious to avoid scandalizing that impassive domestic by demonstrations in which Arthur could not be altogether trusted to refrain from indulging. So they parted, with a bow and a wave of the hand, as intimate

acquaintances, who had seen a good deal of one another during the past six months and were going to see no more of one another for a long time to come, might have done.

But Mr. Foley, when he had listened to a full narration of what had befallen his son at Bridston was of opinion that the time to come — shorter than Arthur anticipated, and that scarcely worth while to seek a temporary tenor St. Ann's.

'I think, do you know,' said he, smiling, 'that if you are very good you will probably be allowed to return home on a ticket-of-leave before your sentence has expired. I dare say it has already begun to dawn upon that dictatorial Colonel of yours that when a woman means to have her own way she always gets it, and he ought to be old enough to understand that brothers and fathers have no sort of chance against lovers. For my own part, I am less exacting than he. I only ask for the occasional use of the library and of a bedroom, in case I should want one to die in. Meanwhile, I think I may run over to St. Ann's in the spring to make the necessary arrangements for my approaching abdication and to interview my future daughter-in-law. I venture to prophesy that, between us, we shall be one too many for the Colonel.'

THE END.





(SEE NEXT PAGE.)

"Give sorrow words: the grief that doth not speak  
Whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break."—*Shakespeare.*



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